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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	01/24 National Guard deploys to hospitals
SOURCE	https://www.krem.com/article/news/local/national-guard-washington-hospitals-omicron-covid/281-3c2215dc-8e23-44a1-a551-e23d12fef549
GIST	SEATTLE — Local hospitals will welcome some much-needed help from the Army National Guard Tuesday, as staff across the region deal with thousands of COVID-19 patients.

The Washington State Hospital Association reports there are at least 2,300 people who are currently hospitalized with COVID-19 in Washington state.

In some parts of the state, like Pierce County, health officials are seeing the highest number of COVID-19 cases they have ever seen.

Earlier this month, Gov. Jay Inslee announced his [plan](#) to deploy 100 National Guard members to eight hospitals across the state with staffing issues due to the omicron surge.

Four hospitals, including UW Medicine/Harborview Medical Center, Multicare Tacoma General Hospital, Providence St. Peter Hospital in Olympia and Kadlec Regional Medical Center in Richland will have National Guard members on-site to help with COVID-19 testing.

Mark Taylor, a registered nurse and Harborview's associate administrator, said staff need the help and have been using nurses, medical assistants and other staff to run COVID-19 testing. Taylor said these staff members would normally be doing functions within the hospital.

"The staff has been awesome. They've been really incredible, this team that's been able to keep this going as long as they have, but I will tell you it's a really welcome sign of relief to have the National Guard here on site," he said. "This will allow us, at least for a month's time, to have those folks return to the hospital, provide the care that they need either directly with patients or in support of patient care."

Providence Regional Medical Center in Everett, Yakima Valley Medical Center, Confluence Health/Central Washington Hospital in Wenatchee and Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center & Children's Hospital in Spokane will have National Guard members helping with non-medical tasks.

Due to capacity concerns in hospitals, Inslee has also called for a temporary halt to non-urgent medical procedures, as well.

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HEADLINE	01/24 King Co. hospitalizations surge 700%
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/covid-hospitalizations-increase-omicron/281-6bab2b50-a489-470c-8e0c-7e1cda6b737f
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — In its latest swipe at the local health care system, the COVID-19 pandemic drove hospitalizations up more than 700% in King County alone over the last month, according to the health department.</p> <p>The daily hospitalization rate went from just eight people a day before the omicron variant surge to 70 people a day. The wave of new patients hit as hospitals backed up amidst staff shortages and a growing subset of patients no longer needing hospital care but having nowhere else to go.</p> <p>“The sheer number of patients means hospital acute care and ICUs across the state are very full. Hospitals are doing everything they can with critical staffing levels to provide care in the most challenging situation we’ve seen to date,” Washington State Hospital Association President and Chief Executive Officer Cassie Sauer said.</p> <p>While there is apparently some relief on the horizon with case rates and hospitalizations dropping in recent days, the strain on health care facilities continues as they currently deal with the highest number of COVID patients ever.</p> <p>Additionally, according to Public Health—Seattle & King County’s (PHSKC) dashboard, the number of COVID-19 deaths has seen a dramatic rise since the start of the month. As of Monday, the previous two weeks saw an 80% increase in deaths compared to the two weeks prior.</p>

	<p>The steep rise in cases and hospitalizations prompted Gov. Jay Inslee to recently order health facilities to delay all non-emergent care, something virtually all health facilities were already doing.</p> <p>On Sunday, PHSKC and a number of partners issued a call-to-action titled “We Need You Help,” an urgent plea for the public to do everything they can to not become another COVID patient.</p> <p>The urgent plea said King County residents can make a difference by getting vaccinated, avoiding crowded areas, getting their booster dose, upgrading their mask to an N95, KN95 or KF94, saving the emergency room for emergencies only and not COVID testing and not delaying routine visits to their doctor.</p> <p>“Our entire staff works hard to support our community. Now we need our community to support us. By helping to reduce the spread of COVID, our community is not only protecting their own families, but they are protecting our healthcare workforce and ensuring we will have enough staff to continue to provide much-needed services,” said Renee Jensen, CEO of Snoqualmie Valley Hospital, in a statement.</p> <p>The new vaccination rate for King County has dwindled in recent weeks, with the majority of doses being given either third or booster doses.</p> <p>Roughly 78% of the county’s population is fully vaccinated against the virus, which equates to about 1.77 million residents. More than 917,000 of those residents have also received their booster dose.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Tribes decry Skagit River dams relicensing
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/investigations/30m-spent-by-seattle-on-skagit-dams-relicensing/281-870d5e13-b338-47f5-99ed-bea71a9fbc31
GIST	<p>DARRINGTON, Wash. — In its quest to relicense its hydroelectric dams on the Skagit River, Seattle City Light has spent approximately \$30 million, records show.</p> <p>The vast majority has gone toward paying scientific specialists, but other expenses include paying consultants to facilitate virtual meetings, craft strategic communications and provide legal advice. Seven law firms, as well as inside counsel, have been involved in the dam relicensing and associated lawsuits filed in response to the process.</p> <p>City Light pays some attorneys as much as \$700 per hour, legal contracts show.</p> <p>The rural tribes of the Skagit Valley, who have depended on the river and the salmon in it since time immemorial, say the amount the city has spent is "astonishing." They’ve been at odds with Seattle City Light throughout the relicensing process over how best to operate the dams under conditions of a new license.</p> <p>Tribal members say they’re fighting to bring back salmon that are on the brink of extinction and Seattle’s dams are part of the problem. One tribal elder called the amount of money "mind-boggling" and said the process is "bleeding every resource" from the tribes as they try to keep up with meetings, legal input and deadlines.</p> <p>Seattle City Light CEO and General Manager Debra Smith said she understands the frustration of tribes that have limited resources.</p> <p>“That’s challenging,” Smith said.</p> <p>To offset expenses, City Light offered the three participating treaty tribes \$25,000 each to participate in the process more easily. One tribe, the La Conner-based Swinomish Tribe, accepted the offer. The Upper Skagit Indian Tribe and the Sauk-Suiattle Tribe declined. Tribal representatives said the amount was too small to be of consequence and could give the appearance of a conflict of interest.</p>

“It was kind of offensive to the tribe,” [Sauk-Suiattle](#) attorney Jack Fiander said. “It looks like you’ve been bought off for \$25,000. The tribe wasn’t willing to accept that because it would look like a conflict of interest when you’re taking the money.”

Smith said the offer was made [in good faith](#).

“I’m sorry that (the tribes) feel that way. Certainly, the intent was never to insult,” Smith said.

The Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe, located in Darrington, is one of the smallest and poorest of all tribes in the state.

“Wow, [\$30 million is] a lot of money,” said Robert Howard, general manager of the Sauk-Suiattle Tribe. “Just to avoid doing the right thing? They could have taken that [money] and applied it to something equitable, something fair, something that sustains the environment and sustains the salmon. That’s hard to understand.”

For nearly 100 years, Seattle City Light [has operated](#) three dams on the Skagit River to provide roughly 20% of the city’s electricity. When the dams were built, no one consulted the Native Americans. According to the Upper Skagit Indian Tribe, construction desecrated ancestral burial grounds and important cultural sites. The dams create reservoirs that now cover up sacred lands that are no longer accessible to tribal members.

The dams also [block off](#) nearly 40% of the river to salmon species in dire need of additional habitat to spawn, grow and recover.

Seattle’s dams - Gorge, Diablo, and Ross - are some of the few in the region that do not include infrastructure to allow fish to get above and below the project. The tribes and government natural resource agencies say the dams harm salmon and starving orcas that depend on Chinook salmon from the Skagit for food.

“[Seattle’s paying] hired guns. I’m sure that’s their job, but we’re a small tribe. Our total tribal budget is a fraction of that, and yet we’re standing up. And yet, we’re trying to do something from our standpoint for the great good of everybody,” Howard said.

Relicensing dams through the [federal government](#) is a highly regulated process that requires years of negotiations, scientific study and legal filings. Seattle began working on initial steps in 2018. The city has budgeted nearly \$70 million for the entire relicensing through 2026. Much of the money will fund scientific studies that stakeholders asked City Light to undertake.

Smith of City Light said the utility is being a good steward of taxpayer money and is spending what is necessary to ensure a high-quality license that will last between 30 and 50 years.

“The most important thing is for us is to come through this process with constructive relationships with the partners that we’ve been working with for years and we will be working with for many years to come. [We want] to come through with a license that supports the ecosystem, supports the fish, supports people, air, birds, water, you name it,” Smith said.

Seattle City Light: ‘No evil intent’

Smith conceded the first two years of negotiations were laden with conflict and there was little progress as utility representatives made strategic mistakes by not listening well enough to stakeholder concerns and viewpoints. Those groups include the three treaty tribes, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, the National Park Service, NOAA Fisheries, Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife and Skagit County government.

“Clearly, things were not going the way they needed to. Were those dollars that were being spent at the time being spent in the most productive way? No. That’s why we made the change that we made,” Smith

said. “We have no evil intent. We are just as capable as anyone else of misstepping. But the thing I want people to know about me more than anything is that if I misstep, I’ll step back and fix what I broke and apologize and move on.”

Seattle receives millions in salmon project funding

Since the city began the dam relicensing process in 2018, the utility has been spending and asking for money. Between 2018 and 2020, the state has funded six grant requests from Seattle City Light, according to the [Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office](#).

The grants total approximately \$4 million and, according to state documents, are to be used for acquiring land “to protect high-quality Chinook habitat in the Skagit River system.”

Critics say when Seattle accepts state money, other groups suffer the consequences.

“Unfortunately, what happens in Seattle doesn’t stay in Seattle – it impacts the whole state, costing taxpayers and salmon on projects that don’t get done elsewhere,” said Todd Myers, director of the Center for the Environment at the [Washington Policy Center](#). Myers is also a member of the [Puget Sound Salmon Recovery Council](#).

Between 2018 and 2020, dozens of smaller groups had their salmon recovery grant proposals rejected, state records show. Those include proposals from the Lummi Nation, the Nez Perce Tribe, the Quileute Tribe of the Quileute, the Asotin County Conservation District, the Nooksack Tribe, the city of Bellingham, the Chehalis Basin Land Trust and the Nisqually Land Trust.

“Other parts of the state, rural areas, where salmon recovery and salmon projects are very important, they don’t have those deep pockets. So, when you take money away from the state that could go to those places you are really doubly harming areas that desperately need that money and where salmon need habitat.”

Smith said the city does not have unlimited resources, and the utility will not apologize for accepting state funding it's entitled to.

“A lot of times we have projects that are really important, and they meet the [grant] criteria,” Smith said. “So, I don’t feel bad for applying for those types of grants. We don’t always get them. There are far more instances where we didn’t get them and where we’ve wondered the same thing: ‘Wow, how come we weren’t successful?’ But when we are, I feel like that’s a good thing and we’ll continue to [apply].”

Tribal members said there’s no price you can put on the Skagit River and the salmon who call it home.

“You can spend a billion dollars on this issue and we’re still going to fight as long as it’s going to take to ensure that the world knows what’s happening here. To ensure that the local stakeholders and just common folks understand what’s right,” said Howard of the Sauk-Suiattle Tribe. “Doing the right thing doesn’t have to have that big of a price tag. Just do what’s right.”

Smith said City Light is now on a positive, cost-efficient path with tribes and agencies dedicated to the Skagit Project relicensing.

“I feel like we’re in a very good place. We’re being frugal, we’re being careful,” Smith said. “We wouldn’t be where we are today with our partners had we not [reset our approach].”

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HEADLINE	01/24 Seattle-area homes \$500K over asking price
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/brutal-crazy-housing-market-has-seattle-area-homes-selling-half-million-over-asking-price/5QWK2YPNNBEYZMNTU3ULXIJUAM/
GIST	SEATTLE — A wild housing market is forcing many Seattle-area home buyers to pay \$300,000 to \$500,000 over asking price — in some cases, even nearly \$1 million over asking.

Homes are getting snatched up hours after they go on sale. Open houses bring so many people, there are lines down the street.

“If you’re a buyer it’s tough. It’s pretty brutal out there. It’s been tough for buyers for the past four years, but in the last 3-4 months it’s just really felt like the most difficult market that we’ve ever navigated,” said Kendra Todd, a real estate broker with Kendra Todd Group at Keller Williams. “It’s fairly common — on the Eastside in particular — for people to be escalating \$300,000, \$400,000, \$500,00 over list price.”

A quick search on Redfin shows many examples. This Kirkland home sold for \$500,000 over asking. This house in Bellevue, listed at \$1.5 million, sold for \$2.4 million— about \$900,000 over asking price.

Todd, who has worked in real estate in Seattle for 14 years, says she has never seen anything like what’s happening now.

“That’s just not normal. That’s not a balanced market,” Todd said. “It really is a crisis of housing inventory in our area,” she said.

It’s making for long and difficult experiences for home buyers.

“It is frustrating. It’s definitely frustrating,” said Zening Chen, a West Seattle resident. He and his fiancée are expecting, and they’re looking to move out of their current home in hopes of finding a house with fewer stairs that’s a better fit for a baby. “The last house we put an offer on had 20 offers total, with several people paying all cash. It’s crazy,” he said.

Steph Giola and her husband are also house hunting. She said they’re trying to play the game, making offers that are hundreds of thousands over asking price but are still getting out bid.

“It’s not even close. It’s 20 people making offers and they’re going at a half million plus over asking,” Giola said. “It’s exhausting knowing there’s only so much you can do,” she said.

“It’s competitive like I didn’t think it could get,” Giola said. “It’s definitely pretty cutthroat and quite an experience,” she said.

Zillow’s senior economist, Jeff Tucker, says there are a few reasons driving what’s going on. He says one reason is that the omicron COVID-19 surge likely stopped sellers from putting their homes on the market.

“If you go on Zillow, there are hardly any homes of any type for sale,” Tucker said. He said Zillow data showed big cities with the most conservative responses to COVID-19 showed the largest shrinks in housing supply.

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HEADLINE	01/25 US spy planes search Russia tactical nukes
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/newsfront/russia-ukraine-nuclear-military/2022/01/25/id/1053847/
GIST	<p>United States spy planes are scouting the build up of Russian forces at its Ukrainian border to see if Russian President Vladimir Putin is deploying tactical nuclear weapons to the theater, The New York Times reported Sunday.</p> <p>According to the report, Russian officials have signaled that the use of such weapons may be an option as it prepares for an invasion of the Ukraine.</p> <p>It is just one of the sobering developments this week as tensions in the region grow, and the United States plans to deploy thousands of troops to the area, including Poland.</p>

“We’re going to actually increase troop presence in Poland, in Romania, et cetera, if in fact he moves,” President Joe Biden said during a press conference last week. “They are part of NATO.”

According to reports, this could mean between 1,000 to 5,000 troops.

In a televised interview on CBS’s “Face the Nation” Sunday, Secretary Anthony Blinken said the U.S. and NATO are looking to beef up defense capabilities should Putin make a move into the Ukraine.

“Even as we’re engaged in diplomacy, we are very much focused on building up defense, building up deterrence,” Blinken said in the interview. “NATO itself will continue to be reinforced in a significant way if Russia commits renewed acts of aggression. All of that is on the table.”

The military maneuvers, along with the state department ordering U.S. diplomats and their families to leave the Ukraine in case of Russian military aggression, show a change in the stance from the Biden administration from restraint and threatening severe economic sanctions to a more proactive military posture with NATO.

“This is clearly in response to the sudden stationing of Russian forces in Belarus, on the border, essentially, with NATO,” Evelyn Farkas, the top Pentagon official for Russia and Ukraine during the Obama administration told The Times. “There is no way that NATO could not reply to such a sudden military move in this political context. The Kremlin needs to understand that they are only escalating the situation with all of these deployments and increasing the danger to all parties, including themselves.”

While there are currently about 4,000 U.S. troops and an additional 1,000 NATO troops stationed in the region, U.S. spy planes have been regularly flying over Ukraine during the last month, listening to the communications of Russian commanders on the ground there, The Times reported.

Air Force E-8 Stars are also flying over the area to log the buildup of service members and any other weapons moving into the theater, including tactical nuclear weapons, according to the report.

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HEADLINE	01/25 Abrupt lockdowns loom over Beijing
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-coronavirus-pandemic-sports-health-beijing-a8f89f612330dd4ca4d2b47a6c03f2dc
GIST	<p>BEIJING (AP) — Beijing residents are coping with abrupt local lockdowns and sweeping COVID-19 testing requirements as the Chinese capital seeks to prevent a coronavirus outbreak ahead of the Winter Olympics that opens in less than two weeks.</p> <p>The lockdowns are part of China’s “zero tolerance” measures to fight the pandemic that have been ratcheted-up ahead of the Games. Those now include requiring tests for anyone who purchases medications to treat cold, cough, fever and other maladies.</p> <p>University student Cheryl Zhang said that the health code app that all Chinese have installed on their smart phones began notifying her to get tested after she bought medication four days previously.</p> <p>“I was seriously panicking,” said Zhang, who was taking a stroll across the street from the Olympic Village. “But when I got to the hospital and saw the medical workers striving to keep things in order, I didn’t feel angry any more. The problem was sorted out very quickly.”</p> <p>At the Anzhen residential community about 2 kilometers (1.2 miles) from the main Olympic Village, residents were confined to their homes from Sunday morning until Tuesday afternoon. A notice said one building remained under isolation.</p>

No word was given about confirmed cases in the area, but all residents were required to be tested for COVID-19, with a second round scheduled for Thursday. Residents must continue monitoring their health for two weeks following the lifting of quarantine.

The strict policies are credited with suppressing major outbreaks. China on Tuesday reported a mere 18 cases of local infection, including five in Beijing. Few have protested the policies, a reflection also of China's authoritarian Communist Party that restricts free speech and tolerates no opposition.

However, at the Anzhen community, an elderly resident said he wished authorities would provide more information.

"I don't worry too much but I hope the situation can be more transparent," said the man, who asked to remain anonymous to avoid trouble from the community management. "We are close to the Olympic Village and if they want to test everyone ahead of the games, we understand, but now the community has been locked down and we were told nothing."

A cluster of COVID-19 cases in Beijing has prompted authorities to test millions and impose new measures, even as the city of Xi'an in north-central China lifted on Monday a monthlong lockdown that had isolated its 13 million residents.

At least six Beijing neighborhoods have been targeted for lockdowns and officials in the capital said they would conduct a second round of mass testing of the Fengtai district's 2 million residents, where the majority of the capital's 40 coronavirus cases since Jan. 15 have been found. Some trains and flights to Beijing have also been suspended to stop travel from areas with outbreaks.

The severe measures, despite a relatively low number of cases, illustrate the acute concern of government officials in the run-up to the Olympics' opening in Beijing on Feb. 4.

All participants in the Games will be tested on arrival and every day and be completely isolated from the general public.

More than 3,000 people have arrived for the Games since Jan. 4, including over 300 athletes and team officials, plus media and other participants, organizers said Monday. So far, 78 people have tested positive, including one who was an athlete or team official.

Jin Dong-yan, a virologist at Hong Kong University, said the small clusters so far are unlikely to affect the Winter Olympics.

He added that while publicly people may not complain about strict anti-virus policies, it's a different story in private.

"Actually under the table there is a lot of questioning and protesting and a lot of complaints" about the lockdowns and other measures that are often imposed with little notice on residents, Jin said.

He also questioned the usefulness of mass testing, saying the focus should be on those "spreaders" likely to be carrying the virus.

"This mass testing is actually wasting a lot of resources, it's completely unnecessary," Jin said.

Overuse of health code apps have also raised privacy concerns among legal experts, Jin said. While most stores and offices and public buildings still require visitors to scan their codes, the requirement is more laxly enforced in residential communities, he said.

Back at the Anzhen community, chef Yang Haiping, who specializes in mutton hotpot, said his restaurant had been forced to temporarily close after many of its employees were placed under lockdown.

	<p>Yang said he served food through gates guarded by police to co-workers who hadn't had sufficient time to stock up.</p> <p>"We will wait for the notice about what to do next," Yang said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/25 Ukraine urges calm; invasion not imminent
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-russia-diplomacy-europe-baltic-sea-44821c52f54b5e927d86ea28420cb2cf
GIST	<p>KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Ukraine's leaders sought to reassure the nation that a feared invasion from neighboring Russia was not imminent, even as they acknowledged the threat is real and prepared to accept a shipment of American military equipment Tuesday to shore up their defenses.</p> <p>Russia has denied it is planning an assault, but it has massed an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine in recent weeks, leading the United States and its NATO allies to rush to prepare for a possible war.</p> <p>Several rounds of high stakes diplomacy have failed to yield any breakthroughs, and this week tensions escalated further. NATO said it was bolstering its deterrence in the Baltic Sea region, and the U.S. ordered 8,500 troops on higher alert to potentially deploy to Europe as part of an alliance "response force" if necessary.</p> <p>The State Department has ordered the families of all American personnel at the U.S. Embassy in Kyiv to leave the country, and it said that nonessential embassy staff could leave. Britain said it, too, was withdrawing some diplomats and dependents from its embassy.</p> <p>In Ukraine, however, authorities have sought to project calm.</p> <p>Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said late Monday that the situation was "under control" and that there is "no reason to panic."</p> <p>Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov said that, as of Monday, that Russia's armed forces had not formed what he called battle groups, "which would have indicated that tomorrow they would launch an offensive."</p> <p>"There are risky scenarios. They're possible and probable in the future," Reznikov told Ukraine's ICTV channel on Monday. "But as of today ... such a threat doesn't exist."</p> <p>Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, echoed that sentiment, saying that the movement of Russian troops near Ukraine's border "is not news."</p> <p>"As of today, we don't see any grounds for statements about a full-scale offensive on our country," Danilov said Monday.</p> <p>Russia has said Western accusations that it is planning an invasion are merely a cover for NATO's own planned provocations. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Tuesday once again accused the U.S. of "fomenting tensions" around the Ukraine, a former Soviet state that Russia has been locked in a bitter tug-of-war with for almost eight years.</p> <p>In 2014, following the ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Ukraine, Moscow annexed the Crimean peninsula and threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in the country's industrial heartland in the east. The fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed rebels has since killed over 14,000 people, and efforts to reach a peaceful settlement of the conflict have stalled.</p> <p>In the latest standoff, Russia has demanded guarantees from the West that NATO would never allow Ukraine to join and that the alliance would curtail other actions, such as stationing troops in former Soviet</p>

	<p>bloc countries. Some of these, like any pledge to permanently bar Ukraine, are non-starters for NATO — creating a seemingly intractable stalemate that many fear can only end in war.</p> <p>Putting the U.S.-based troops on heightened alert for Europe on Monday suggested diminishing hope that Russian President Vladimir Putin will back away from what U.S. President Joe Biden himself has said looks like a threat to invade neighboring Ukraine.</p> <p>As part of a new \$200 million in security assistance directed to Ukraine from the United States, a shipment including equipment and munitions is also expected to arrive Tuesday in Ukraine.</p> <p>The U.S. moves are being done in tandem with actions by other NATO member governments to bolster a defensive presence in Eastern Europe. Denmark, for example, is sending a frigate and F-16 warplanes to Lithuania; Spain is sending four fighter jets to Bulgaria and three ships to the Black Sea to join NATO naval forces, and France stands ready to send troops to Romania.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Heavy smog blankets Beijing
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/sports/winter-olympics/heavy-smog-blankets-beijing-ahead-of-olympics-as-authorities-pledge-to-clean-up-the-air/ar-AAT59cj
GIST	<p>With less than two weeks to go until the Opening Ceremonies of the Beijing Winter Olympics, the Chinese government said it is battling “extremely unfavorable” weather to clear the city’s skies of hazardous smog.</p> <p>On Sunday, Beijing residents’ air pollution apps turned purple, the color indicating a “very unhealthy” level of tiny particulate matter. Forecasts for the next seven days suggest a midweek improvement, then another deterioration ahead of Jan. 31, Lunar New Year’s Eve, when authorities may have to contend with celebratory fireworks releasing plumes of smoke into the sky.</p> <p>On Monday, the Ministry of Ecology and Environment said the Olympics are arriving just as seasonal weather creates “extremely unfavorable conditions” across northern China. Ministry officials promised to fix the situation ahead of the Opening Ceremonies on Feb. 4 and authorized local governments to take “necessary action” to improve air quality.</p> <p>While less severe than Beijing’s infamous “airpocalypse” winters of a decade ago, the spiking pollution levels make outdoor exercise inadvisable just as athletes are arriving and add to fears that China will not fulfill promises of a “green” and carbon-neutral Olympics.</p> <p>Lauri Myllyvirta, lead analyst at the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, a Finland-based group, said the downturn in air quality, despite extensive government preparations, “shows how far Beijing has to go to systematically limit winter air pollution.”</p> <p>“Even after all the progress in controlling emissions, the vast concentration of industry around Beijing means that when the weather is unfavorable, smog returns,” he said.</p> <p>A relapse into Beijing’s hazier days during the Olympics would be especially embarrassing for a city that went to great lengths to deliver blue skies during the 2008 Summer Games. Then, the cleanup effort required hundreds of factories to be shuttered or relocated. Thousands of home coal-burning boilers were converted to natural gas.</p> <p>Air quality in the city improved by 50 percent over that summer, according to official numbers. The drastic change meant more than just a welcome respite for Beijingers, underscoring the pressing health concerns of pollution. By comparing mortality rates in Beijing that summer to those in other cities in China, economists estimated that a 10 percent decrease in the particulate matter known as PM10 prevented about 196,000 premature deaths.</p>

In the following years, awareness of the harmful effects of air pollution on the nation's health mounted until a 2015 documentary from a state media journalist on the topic was [an instant hit](#) — before being quickly banned. In the face of mounting popular pressure, the government declared war on pollution.

Beijing's air quality has improved dramatically since then. Last year, concentrations of the minuscule and more dangerous pollutant known as PM2.5 met national standards of 35 micrograms per cubic meter of air for the first time. But that level is still about seven times higher than the World Health Organization's recommended amounts, and it often soars higher in the winter months.

Even as the start of the Olympics nears, the Chinese government has a range of options to rapidly improve air quality. Among those is an expansive weather modification program that uses cloud-seeding technology to increase rainfall in an attempt to flush out dirty skies.

Another method is to further reduce output from smoke-belching steel mills and coal-fired power plants. In Tangshan, the steelmaking capital of China about 100 miles east of Beijing, most factories were ordered to operate at well below full capacity from August until March.

But acting too harshly could risk a backlash from industry after authorities had promised to minimize the economic costs of the Games. In December, the Environment Ministry was forced to deny rumors it planned to order production cuts for coal-burning industries in multiple provinces.

Then there are the upcoming New Year celebrations. A ban on unauthorized fireworks in downtown Beijing is a long-standing feature of the anti-pollution campaign, but the prohibition had been only partially successful in reducing amateur pyrotechnics on the city's streets. This winter, restrictions have been expanded to the suburbs and backed up by a crackdown on the underground firecracker trade.

In the last three months of 2021, Beijing police confiscated 8,604 boxes of firecrackers and slapped 103 offenders with punishments ranging from a warning to criminal detention. Cash rewards of up to 20,000 yuan (about \$3,000) were offered for tips.

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HEADLINE	01/24 Russia 'strategic partnership' with Cuba?
SOURCE	https://www.stripes.com/theaters/americas/2022-01-24/putin-cuba-strategic-partnership-4402280.html
GIST	<p>Following recent threats of a potential military deployment to Cuba earlier this month, Russia's President Vladimir Putin discussed the "strategic partnership" and further coordination of "actions in the international arena" with Cuban leader Miguel Díaz-Canel in a call disclosed Monday by the Kremlin.</p> <p>In a tweet, Díaz-Canel said the two leaders held a "cordial and fruitful telephone conversation" about "the current international situation" and the development of "future links in different spheres."</p> <p>News of the conversation comes amid rising fears of a Russian military action in Ukraine. NATO said Monday it was putting forces on standby and sending additional ships and fighter jets to Eastern Europe while President Joe Biden was reportedly considering sending troops to the region.</p> <p>Cuba and Venezuela were dragged into the drama surrounding the conflict earlier this month after Russia's deputy foreign minister, Sergei Ryabkov, told a Russian television station that he could "neither confirm nor exclude" potential military deployments to the two Latin American nations.</p> <p>"I'm not going to respond to bluster in the public commentary," Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, told reporters at the time. "If Russia were to move in that direction, we would deal with it decisively."</p> <p>U.S. officials have said that the potential deployments have not come up during talks held between the U.S., Russia and other NATO countries.</p>

	<p>The Cuban government never responded to Ryabkov's comments.</p> <p>Russia has been reinforcing its economic and military ties to the Caribbean island in the past few years. According to the Kremlin's readout of the call, the leaders had "an in-depth exchange of opinions on bilateral cooperation in trade, the economy and investment." Cuba's handpicked president also thanked his Russian counterpart for the humanitarian aid supplied to fight COVID-19.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Idaho on top important element on Earth
SOURCE	https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/idaho-is-sitting-on-one-of-the-most-important-elements-on-earth/ar-AAT5y3P
GIST	<p>On September 13, I took my first plane trip in 18 months: Kansas City to Boise with a layover in Denver. The trip itself was largely uneventful, with one exception. After I boarded my connecting flight in Denver, a pilot announced that we would be briefly delayed because Air Force One was also en route to Boise. President Biden was responding to yet another record-setting wildfire season, during which 5.3 million acres of the U.S., an area the size of New Jersey, had already burned. "We can't ignore the reality that these wildfires are being supercharged by climate change," he would say later that day. "It isn't about red or blue states. It's about fires. Just fires."</p> <p>The wildfires had both everything and nothing to do with my trip to Boise and, from there, to the Salmon-Challis National Forest, a five-hour drive northeast of the city. For me, the area's most immediate draw was cobalt, a hard, silvery-gray metal used to make heat-resistant alloys for jet engines and, more recently, most of the lithium-ion batteries for electric vehicles. The Salmon-Challis sits atop what is known as the Idaho Cobalt Belt, a 34-mile-long geological formation of sedimentary rock that contains some of the largest cobalt deposits in the country. As the global market for lithium-ion batteries has grown—and the price of cobalt along with it—so has commercial interest in the belt. At least six mining companies have applied for permits from the U.S. Forest Service to operate in the region. Most of these companies are in the early stages of exploration; one has started to build a mine. In Idaho, as in much of the world, the clean-energy revolution is reshaping the geography of resource extraction.</p> <p>And so it was that, on a pleasantly cool late-summer morning, I found myself in the back seat of a Ford Expedition alongside the mining engineer Matthew Lengerich. As the executive general manager of mining for Jervois Global, the Australian company that owns the new mine, Lengerich was my guide for the day. Lengerich has been in the mining industry for the past 23 years, and before joining Jervois in August, he worked for the Anglo-Australian mining giant Rio Tinto. He told me that he switched companies, at least in part, because of his interest in electric vehicles. "The EV story is one that I personally believe in," he said. "I think it's here to stay. I'm happy to share that I saw the initial trailer for the F-150 Lightning and went, 'That's really cool.'"</p> <p>For most of our hour and a half drive from Jervois's office in the town of Salmon to the Jervois mine, we bumped along a dirt road that ran adjacent to several creeks and down a series of vertigo-inducing switchbacks. Lengerich said he had recently seen black-bear cubs run across the road; I saw a grouse and two mule deer. "This is our commute to work," Lengerich said, with a hint of genuine awe. "We're not sitting in traffic on I-15. You get to drive this." He pointed out the window to rugged mountains covered in ponderosa pines and Douglas firs. Yet cobalt mining has already changed this landscape, and is poised to do so again.</p> <p>The lone access road to the Jervois mine cuts through what was once the only cobalt mine in the U.S., the 10,830-acre Blackbird Mine. Now a toxic waste site, it includes a 12-acre open pit, 4.8 million tons of waste rock, 2 million tons of tailings, and enough tunnels that, if they were strung together, you could run a half marathon in them and still have nearly a mile to spare. As we drove through, we passed the crumbling concrete remains of a tailings mill, then a log-framed portal covered by a plywood door. The water-treatment plant, however, was still operating.</p>

Blackbird closed in the early 1980s after more than 30 years of intermittent operations. By then, the surrounding creeks were lifeless; heavy-metal pollution had killed off most of their fish and aquatic insects. The concentration of copper in one creek was so high that the water turned bright blue. (Copper is often found in the same areas as cobalt.) In 1993, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed adding Blackbird to its National Priorities List, a designation reserved for the worst-contaminated sites in the country. Ultimately, the EPA negotiated a settlement with the companies that owned the mine. But the agency did label the mine as a Superfund site, initiating a cleanup that has so far cost the companies more than \$100 million.

When I asked people in the cobalt industry about Blackbird, many pointed out that mining practices and regulatory oversight have improved in recent decades. But accidents can still happen. “Man is imperfect,” said Daniel Stone, a policy analyst for the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, whose historic homeland covers the southern half of Idaho and large portions of bordering states. “Small flaws could lead to big problems down the road.” For Stone, those problems are deeply personal: Mining not only polluted the Shoshone-Bannock homeland but led to the forcible removal of Shoshone people from the area in the late 19th century. “It’s what some people would call historical trauma,” Stone said. “But I have a problem calling it historical trauma, because it never stopped.”

Stone told me that the tribes don’t necessarily oppose new mines on their ancestral land. They do, however, expect companies to prevent pollution and restore the landscape before they leave. To that end, federal regulations required Jervois to post a \$30.8 million reclamation bond to fund cleanup activities after the mine closes. “The hope is always that this mine does not become a detriment to environmental health,” Stone said. “But I’m definitely not so naive as to think that there’s not at least the potential for problems to develop.”

When we arrived at the Jervois mine, the sky was clear and blue, though smoke from distant wildfires would turn it gray by the end of the afternoon. I followed Lengerich out of the car and to a pile of rocks that served as a makeshift overlook. Below stood a half-dozen steel-and-concrete buildings in various stages of completion. In the distance were a water-treatment plant; two water-management ponds; a tailings-storage facility; and the beginnings of a “man camp,” a collection of prefab houses where miners will live during their shifts. “Today’s a big day for us,” Lengerich said, explaining that contractors were scheduled to pour the last of the foundation for the building directly in front of us, where two mills would eventually grind cobalt ore into sand-size grains for processing.

The entrance to the mine was under construction on the northwest side of nearby Gant Mountain, at an elevation of 7,080 feet. There, a massive machine resembling a one-armed praying mantis was drilling 12-foot-long steel bolts into the treeless mountainside. Gusts of wind stirred up clouds of dust as the machine, called a jumbo, lumbered from one position to the next on a narrow dirt road. The mine itself will consist of three vertical, corkscrew-shaped tunnels descending more than 1,300 feet underneath the mountain. As we watched the jumbo, Lengerich stressed that the environmental impact of it all would be minimal. Jervois has pledged to backfill and seal off the underground tunnels, reclaim as many roads as possible, and revegetate the site with native plants. “In 30 years, you’ll have no idea there was a mine here,” Lengerich said. “Everything will be put back the way it was.” He paused for a moment, then corrected himself. “Thirty years might be a bit soon,” he said. “I’d say 40 to 50 years.”

Jervois estimates that its mine in the Idaho Cobalt Belt will produce 1,915 metric tons of cobalt annually, enough for about 160,000 electric-vehicle batteries. That’s a drop in the bucket compared with the output of mines in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which, as home to more than half of the world’s known cobalt reserves, produced 95,000 metric tons of cobalt in 2020, about 70 percent of the global supply. With little oversight and few safety measures, the mining industry in the Congo is notoriously dangerous. Men work in hand-dug tunnels that can extend hundreds of feet underground, while children as young as 7 sift through tailings on the surface. Wages are poor. Cave-ins are common. And the long-term health effects of the work, including chronic lung disease caused by inhaling dust, can be deadly. Some can even be multigenerational: A recent study in the Congo that was published in *The Lancet* found that men who worked in mines were more likely to father children with birth defects than those who did not.

The majority of cobalt mined in the Congo is exported to China—84 percent in 2019. In a report on strategically important supply chains issued in June, the White House rated the nation’s cobalt supply more vulnerable than any other metal. Though the report raised supply concerns about other metals that are needed to make lithium-ion batteries, namely lithium and nickel, it described the cobalt market as “one of the most comprehensive ways China has gained a competitive advantage in the critical materials landscape for batteries.”

The nation’s—and the world’s—reliance on China and the Congo for cobalt has attracted companies to the Idaho Cobalt Belt. That was the case for Trent Mell, the CEO of Electra Battery Materials, a Canadian company that is Jervois’s main competitor there. “America could solve a lot of its reliance issues [with] cobalt in this belt,” Mell told me when I met him one morning in Salmon. “But to do that, we’re going to need to be more open and accepting to mining and mining on federal lands.” When I later asked him what he would like to see change, he said that a shorter federal permitting process would be a good place to start. Jervois’s mine took eight years to get permitted.

In addition to Electra’s mining claims in the Idaho Cobalt Belt, the company also owns a cobalt refinery in Ontario, Canada, the first in North America. Though Mell said that a fully operational Idaho mine is at least five years away, the refinery, which for now plans to import cobalt from two mines in the Congo, is on track to open late this year. The refinery’s location 500 miles north of Detroit positions it to contribute to the electric-vehicle industry in the U.S., which received a major boost in August when Biden set a national goal of electric vehicles representing half of all new-vehicle sales by 2030.

No one really knows how much cobalt is in the Idaho Cobalt Belt. Many deposits haven’t been measured, and others may be as yet undiscovered. Geologists are fairly sure that the Jervois and Electra claims encompass more than 40,000 metric tons of the metal, enough to fulfill U.S. demand for five years. But whether the two operations lead to a boom in the belt remains far from certain. “A lot of companies are in a wait-and-see mode,” says Josh Johnson, a geologist at the Idaho Conservation League. If the price of cobalt stays high enough for the Jervois mine to be successful, he said, “I think we’ll see more.”

Johnson’s group, which has fought for decades to protect the state’s forests and streams from mine pollution, is watching the new and proposed cobalt mines closely, evaluating them on a case-by-case basis. “Do we have a moral obligation to mine cobalt here in the U.S.?” asks Idaho Conservation League Executive Director Justin Hayes. He suggests that the answer is yes: He’s well aware of the human-rights abuses documented in the Congo, and of the need to secure a reliable supply of cobalt in order to reduce the threat of climate change. Still, he emphasizes that “sustainable mining,” a term used often by industry insiders, is a misnomer; the best anyone can hope for is “environmentally responsible mining.”

More cobalt mines inevitably mean more environmental risks, especially when you consider that metal mining generates more toxic waste than any other industry in the United States. Even if none of the mining operations being developed in the belt ends up as a Superfund site, they can still cause damage—sometimes even before they start production. In October, for example, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality fined an Electra subsidiary \$95,000 for “unpermitted discharges” into a creek about 20 miles southeast of Blackbird. The discharges came from adits the company uses for exploration.

Lengerich points out that the treatment plant under construction at the Jervois mine could operate for 100 years if necessary, much longer than the expected lifespan of the mine itself. “I like the idea of hoping for the best and planning for the worst,” he says. But how do we plan for the worst when, because of climate change, the worst is both unpredictable and incomprehensible? As the floods, fires, heat waves, and hurricanes of the past year illustrated, many once-reliable systems are newly vulnerable.

On our drive back to Salmon, Lengerich and I passed by a fire line that Forest Service crews had cut to protect the town from a recent wildfire. Lengerich said the fire had come within half a mile of the Jervois mine site, limiting access for three weeks. The fire damaged only a waterline and a power line guy-wire, he added. Assuming that there are no other major delays, the mine will start production this summer, in the middle of Idaho’s fire season.

Three days after my tour of the Jervois mine, I got a closer look at the damage wrought by the Blackbird Mine. On this trip, I was accompanied by the local site manager, George Lusher, and the reclamation manager, Mark TenBrink, both employees at the Anglo-Swiss multinational Glencore, one of the mining companies responsible for cleaning up the site. Lusher drove us in his Ford F-250. During the drive, I brought up electric vehicles. TenBrink, who lives in San Jose, said that he drives an electric Toyota RAV4 and loves it. Lusher was more skeptical. “I think electric cars are a great idea, especially for big cities,” he said. But they would “have to come a long way” before he would feel comfortable driving one. “I want to stay warm and I want to make it back,” he said.

One of our first stops was the Blackbird water-treatment plant, a windowless building made of corrugated metal and concrete and attached to what looked like an industrial-size aboveground pool. This is where contaminated water from the underground mine workings and several collection ponds is diverted before being released into Blackbird Creek. Standing on a catwalk above the pool, I watched as a revolving mechanical rake collected heavy metals that had coagulated into a sludge and sunk to the bottom. Within a day or two, one of the plant’s two full-time operators would load the sludge into a water tanker and haul it to one of three open-air basins farther up the site. There, it would be left to dry in the sun. TenBrink said that he has looked into sending the sludge to a smelter in Canada, where copper and cobalt could be extracted from it. But in the end, he concluded that doing so wasn’t economically feasible, so the sludge remains in the pits for now. I asked him when the water treatment would end. He didn’t have a date. “It’s really a very long way off,” he said.

Prospectors first discovered gold and copper around Blackbird Creek in the late 1800s, and in 1901, a man named John Belliel staked the first cobalt claim in the area, reportedly after he spotted a “cobalt bloom”—gray rock streaked with pink—near the creek. But it wasn’t until 1949 that full-scale mining operations began, spurred by federal subsidies designed to boost the nation’s mineral stockpile during the early years of the Cold War. Blackbird was the only primary producer of cobalt in the U.S., and for a decade it prospered. Cobalt, a company town that sprouted up a few miles east of the mine, was at one point home to 1,500 residents.

Blackbird’s boom years ended as quickly as they began. In 1959, the U.S. Office of Civil and Defense Mobilization announced that the national cobalt stockpile was “sufficiently large to meet all foreseeable mobilization requirements.” Having lost its largest buyer, the mine closed, and Cobalt, like countless mining communities before it, became a ghost town. By 1961, its population had dwindled to 20, and The New York Times predicted that the town was “likely to be given back to the forest, the deer and the hawk.”

Over the next three decades, a handful of companies tried to reopen the mine. For a few years in the 1960s, a Salt Lake City–based company extracted copper from its open pit. Subsequent owners spent years exploring the site’s remaining cobalt deposits, but the metal’s price remained too low for mining to be profitable. Finally, in 1982, the mine shut down for good. The following year, the state of Idaho sued the two companies that had come to share ownership of the mine, over the cobalt, copper, arsenic, and other heavy metals that had drained from the mine into Blackbird Creek and others.

The legal battle dragged on until 1995, when three past and present mine owners agreed to clean up the site and cover the cost of it themselves. Those companies, one of which was eventually acquired by Glencore, became known as the Blackbird Mine Site Group. Over the past 26 years, the group has restored creeks, sealed off mine portals, and constructed an intricate system of ponds and ditches designed to separate clean water from contaminated water. In the early 2000s, Chinook salmon returned to nearby Panther Creek.

Christopher Mebane, a self-described “dirty-water biologist” for the U.S. Geological Survey who has done fieldwork around Blackbird, told me that the site has come a long way since he first visited it, in the early 1990s. “It’s a glass that’s nine-tenths full,” he said. His main worry is that cleanup targets created specifically for Blackbird as part of the legal settlement allow for a concentration of cobalt that he believes is at least 10 times higher than is safe for many species of aquatic insects. Fortunately, the concentration of cobalt in the site’s discharge has mostly remained below the official limit—sometimes even below

Mebane's limit—for years, progress that Mebane attributes to the cleanup. Now, though, he worries that new mines will be allowed to adopt the same standard, as Jervois's was, because state and federal agencies don't have an alternative. "It's just not protective," Mebane said.

In the early 1950s, when production at Blackbird began to ramp up, its operating company built an earthen dam on the west fork of Blackbird Creek, not far from where John Belliel staked his initial claim. Over the next several decades, 2 million tons of tailings were dumped behind the dam. During my visit to the site, we stopped on top of it to see the tailings impoundment, a 20-acre soil-covered pit. I asked where the creek was. "You're looking at it," Lusher said. He pointed to a narrow concrete channel that cut across the impoundment and led to a spillway on the side of the dam. Were the dam to fail, there would be nothing to stop the tailings from tumbling into the main branch of Blackbird Creek, potentially reaching the Salmon River.

The channel was designed to withstand a 500-year flood, Lusher told me as we walked alongside it. But 500-year floods are exactly the kind of extreme-weather events that climate change could cause to occur more frequently. And while federal regulators have determined that the dam is structurally sound, it's not impermeable even under normal conditions. Water sometimes seeps into the tailings impoundment, where it collects iron sulfide, and then drains into Blackbird Creek. The water isn't polluted enough to require action under the current regulations, but its effects on the creek are impossible to miss. "Instead of blue rocks, you now have orange rocks," TenBrink said. I didn't ask how long until the rocks would return to their natural color. The answer seemed obvious.

The first thing Bret Riggan does when he gets home from work every day is crack open a Keystone Light. A gruff man with a thick mustache and even thicker drawl, Riggan lives with his dog, a young mutt named Richard, in a Silver Streak trailer parked on the Cobalt town site.

Riggan has worked as an operator at the Blackbird water-treatment plant since 1996. Unlike Lengerich, he hates the long drive to and from Salmon, which is why he decided to live out here. On the afternoon I met him, he was nailing a NO TRESPASSING sign to a fence post next to the gated entrance of the town site. He invited me to his trailer and offered me a beer. "I'm the mayor, the sheriff," he told me as we drank on his deck. "I'm everything." He is Cobalt's only resident, and he likes it that way.

Despite widespread expectation that Cobalt would be abandoned after the federal government stopped subsidizing Blackbird in the late 1950s, the town survived for several more decades. Riggan himself lived there in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when he was in his early 20s and worked for a company that was exploring new ore deposits at the mine. At the time, Riggan told me, more than 100 other mine workers lived in Cobalt. Many, including him, were single men who crammed into three bunkhouses at the edge of town. The others lived in small, single-story houses with their families. The town had a recreation center with a bowling alley and a basketball court, and a mile or so outside of town was a popular bar called the Panther Creek Inn. "I spent a lot of time up there," Riggan said. "Shed a lot of blood there—mine." He didn't go into details.

Today, only two houses remain in Cobalt, not including Riggan's trailer. The rest have either been demolished or hauled away. Some ended up in Salmon, where they became homes to new families. Riggan helped burn down many of the others in the late 1990s. About a decade ago, he helped tear down the Panther Creek Inn, which had become a watering hole for hunters after the miners left. "That hurt me," he said. Aside from the two houses, one of which has all but caved in on itself, the only other original structure that still exists in Cobalt is a dilapidated tank once used to store drinking water. After we finished our beers, Riggan took me to see it. Perched on a forested hill above the town site, its rusted walls were graffitied with the names of former residents. Riggan read out the names he recognized while reminiscing about skinny-dipping in the tank. "It ain't much," he said. "But it's about all that's left."

It's tempting to see Blackbird and Cobalt as cautionary tales—to conclude that mines will always create environmental disasters and that mining booms are always followed by devastating busts. And yet during the two weeks I spent in and around Salmon, many people I met expressed cautious optimism about the return of cobalt mining. Tammy Stringham, the executive director of the Lemhi County Economic

Development Association, talked excitedly about how the industry could provide a boost to the local economy. She had heard that the Jervois mine alone would create as many as 150 jobs, though she was wary of getting her hopes up. It was hard to blame her. The Jervois mine had originally been scheduled to open in 2011 under a different owner, but volatility in the global cobalt market delayed construction for years.

Leo Marshall is the mayor of Salmon and, as it happens, a former resident of Cobalt. He lived there with his father, who worked at Blackbird, and his stepmother, for most of the 1950s. Having moved to Salmon in 1981 and served as mayor since 2010, Marshall has experienced the cobalt boom-and-bust cycle firsthand. He hopes this time will be different, and he has good reason to think it will be. According to data from S&P Global Market Intelligence, cobalt prices were nearly 63 percent higher last year than they were in 2021, and electric vehicles are expected to account for nearly 70 percent of cobalt demand growth through 2025. On October 25, in a sign of the electric-vehicle market's trajectory, Tesla's market capitalization rose above \$1 trillion for the first time.

One afternoon in Salmon, I visited a car dealership called Quality Motors, just down the road from the Jervois office. Parked out front were six F-150s and a Dodge Ram. When I asked the owner, Dave Hull, about electric vehicles, he told me that he didn't expect to start selling them anytime soon. This didn't surprise me. Many locals I met shared George Lusher's doubts about their reliability, while others were simply resistant to change. And as far as I could tell, the only charging station in town was located on the side of my hotel, the Stagecoach Inn. Still, Hull didn't doubt that electric vehicles would become commonplace in Salmon. "It's just a matter of time," he said. "We're at least 10 years away, but it's coming." When we finished talking, I got back in my rental car, a Ford Fusion hybrid, and drove away.

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HEADLINE	01/25 Govts used Covid erode human rights?
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/jan/25/governments-around-the-world-used-covid-to-erode-human-rights-report
GIST	<p>The global fight against corruption has been at a standstill for a decade, with 86% of countries either worsening or making no progress in tackling the problem, and with numerous governments accused of using the pandemic to erode human rights and democracy, a report has found.</p> <p>Transparency International's annual corruption ranking, published on Tuesday, also found countries that violate civil liberties consistently have low scores, underlining how failure to tackle corruption exacerbates human rights abuses and undermines democracy.</p> <p>First launched in 1995, the corruption perceptions index (CPI) has become one of the leading global trackers of public sector corruption, drawing data from 13 public sources, including the World Bank and the World Economic Forum. At least three sources are required to provide a ranking for each of the 180 countries included.</p> <p>The index gives a mark out of 100 – with 100 representing “very clean” and zero representing “highly corrupt”. Countries are ranked relative to each other.</p> <p>The 2021 index highlights the connection between corruption, democracy and human rights – from the lowest-scoring countries to advanced economies.</p> <p>It notes that out of 331 recorded cases of murdered human rights defenders in 2020, 98% occurred in countries with a CPI score below 45.</p> <p>The report cites recent cases in the Philippines and Venezuela.</p> <p>“The Philippines has continued its fall beginning in 2014 to a score of 33, as President Rodrigo Duterte has cracked down on freedoms of association and expression since his election in 2016,” said Transparency International.</p>

“It also has an exceptionally high murder rate of human rights defenders, with 20 killed in 2020.”

In Venezuela, the report says: “The government of President Nicolás Maduro has [repressed dissent](#) of political opponents, journalists and even healthcare workers. The country has significantly declined on the CPI over the last decade, earning its lowest score yet of 14 in 2021.”

The index also examines regional drivers of corruption.

In eastern Europe and central Asia, the report describes a “vicious cycle of increasing authoritarianism, human rights abuses and corruption [where] political leaders used the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext to reduce oversight and accountability for public procurement and foreign aid spending, from Albania to Kyrgyzstan”.

Altynai Myrzabekova, Transparency International’s central Asia regional adviser, said: “2021 has been devastating for civil rights across eastern Europe and central Asia. Corrupt leaders repress all dissent – from opposition parties, to activists and the press.

“While doing little to combat the Covid-19 pandemic’s impact on the population, governments have utilised it to further curb rights and freedoms, further entrenching authoritarianism.”

While the index noted some improvements in sub-Saharan Africa, it described them as being “overshadowed by backsliding and stagnation in others ... [with] serious corruption problems ... exacerbated by ongoing violent conflicts and terrorist attacks in countries from South Sudan to [Mali](#)”.

Samuel Kaninda, the group’s Africa adviser, said: “A decade of stagnating corruption levels has been devastating for sub-Saharan Africa. Natural resources are plundered and millions of people lack access to public services, while violent conflicts rage on and terrorist threats rise. Meanwhile, grand corruption allows elites to act with impunity, siphoning money away from the continent and leaving the public with little in the way of rights or resources.”

Similarly, in the Middle East and north Africa, Transparency International found “systemic political corruption obstructs progress and exacerbates human rights abuses.

“In light of rampant political corruption across the Arab states, the region is struggling to achieve any tangible results in the fight for transparency, human rights and democracy. Not a single country has significantly improved since 2012. Political elites and private interests time and again overtake the common good to benefit themselves and maintain autocracy.”

Denmark, Finland and New Zealand topped the index with scores of 88 out of 100, while in its lowest reaches Somalia and Syria each scored 13, and South Sudan 11.

The index also reported 27 countries – among them Cyprus (scoring 53), Canada (74), Lebanon (24) and Honduras (23) – reaching historic lows last year.

Delia Ferreira Rubio, chair of Transparency International, said: “Human rights are not simply a nice-to-have in the fight against corruption. Authoritarian approaches destroy independent checks and balances and make anti-corruption efforts dependent on the whims of an elite. Ensuring people can speak freely and work collectively to hold power to account is the only sustainable route to a corruption-free society.”

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The world's 10 least and 10 most corrupt countries

100 = very clean, 0 = extremely corrupt

Denmark 88

Finland 88

New Zealand 88

Norway 85

Singapore **85**
 Sweden **85**
 Switzerland **84**
 Netherlands **82**
 Luxembourg **81**
 Germany **80**
 Turkmenistan **19**
 Democratic Republic of the Congo **19**
 Libya **17**
 Equatorial Guinea **17**
 Afghanistan **16**
 North Korea **16**
 Yemen **16**
 Venezuela **14**
 Syria **13**
 Somalia **13**
 South Sudan **11**

Guardian graphic. Source: Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2021

HEADLINE	01/25 Dutch university gives up China funding
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/25/dutch-university-gives-up-chinese-funding-due-to-impartiality-concerns
GIST	<p>A decision by a leading Dutch university to refuse all further Chinese funding for a controversial study centre has sparked fresh concern about Beijing's apparent attempts to influence debate at European educational institutions.</p> <p>Amsterdam's Vrije Universiteit (VU), the fourth largest university in the Netherlands, has said it will accept no further money from the Southwest University of Political Science and Law in Chongqing and repay sums it recently received.</p> <p>The announcement came after an investigation by the Dutch public broadcaster NOS last week revealed VU's Cross Cultural Human Rights Center (CCHRC) had received between €250,000 (£210,000) and €300,000 annually from Southwest over the past few years.</p> <p>According to NOS, the CCHRC used Southwest's money to fund a regular newsletter, organise seminars and maintain its website – which has published several posts rejecting western criticism of China's human rights policy.</p> <p>In October 2020, for example, the site noted that academics associated with the CCHRC had recently visited four cities in Xinjiang province and concluded there was “definitely no discrimination of Uyghurs or other minorities in the region”.</p> <p>NOS cited Tom Zwart, a Utrecht University human rights professor and president of the CCHRC, as telling Chinese state TV that human rights in China “must be seen in the context of domestic circumstances, and cannot copy the west”.</p> <p>Another associate of the centre, Peter Peverelli, has also described reports of forced labour camps for Uyghurs as “rumours” and said it is fashionable to criticise China.</p> <p>“Xinjiang is just lovely,” Peverelli said, according to the public broadcaster. “Lovely people, breathtaking nature, great food. And no forced labour, no genocide, or whatever other lies the western media might come up with.”</p>

The centre, which counts among its affiliates academics from institutions in the [Netherlands](#), China and other countries, describes itself as an independent research institute aimed at encouraging open cross-cultural debate about human rights concepts and issues.

VU said in a statement that “even the appearance of research not being independent is unacceptable”. The university would accept no further funding from China, return last year’s money and launch a full inquiry, [the statement said](#).

Zwart told NOS the website was a forum for academic free speech and posts did not necessarily reflect CCHRC’s research findings. The fact that some views on the site aligned with Chinese government positions did not indicate formal support, he said.

The Dutch education minister, Robbert Dijkgraaf, said he was “very shocked” by the revelations, adding: “Academic freedom, integrity and independence must be guaranteed and it is important that Dutch institutions remain alert to possible risks of undesired influence by other countries and take adequate measures.”

The incident follows multiple other examples of China’s efforts to exercise soft power through European academic institutions, which in November prompted Germany’s then education minister to demand universities review all their links with China.

Anja Karliczek said Chinese influence over universities was “unacceptable” amid accusations that about 200 state-funded Confucius institutes at academic institutions in Europe were merely “spreading propaganda for the Chinese Communist party”.

Despite fears of “elite capture” and even a threat to national security, Hungary in May announced plans to open a branch of China’s prestigious Shanghai-based Fudan University in Budapest, saying it would raise higher education standards and bring Chinese investment and research to the country.

Britain’s former higher education minister, Jo Johnson, [said in March last year](#) that the risks involved in Beijing’s investment in the UK’s universities was “poorly understood” after a study identified “a significant increase in funding from China and collaboration with Chinese researchers over the past two decades”.

“The UK needs to do a better job of measuring, managing and mitigating risks that are at present poorly understood and monitored,” Johnson said. Failure to do so risks real damage to our knowledge economy.”

The report found a significant increase over the past 20 years in Chinese funding for university research including in such sensitive areas as automation, materials science and telecommunications, as well as in disciplines where collaboration “may threaten freedom of speech”.

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HEADLINE	01/24 UW returns to in-person learning 31 Jan.
SOURCE	https://mynorthwest.com/3324187/uw-in-person/
GIST	<p>The University of Washington plans to return to mostly in-person learning next Monday, January 31st. The decision follows their announcement in late December that their winter quarter would begin online.</p> <p>“The improving public health situation and the resulting reduction in coronavirus-related disruptions allows us to follow through with our plans to return to largely in-person classes and learning experiences on Monday, Jan. 31,” a UW news update reads.</p> <p>The update lists a number of metrics used to determine whether or not a reversal might be warranted in the coming weeks and months.</p>

	<p>“Several scenarios are considered when evaluating a return to largely remote instruction and/or operations, including a major uptick in on-campus transmissions or positivity rates; greatly diminished capacity in our area hospitals; major disruptions in our K-12 schools or transportation systems; or the imposition of state or local restrictions, such as distancing requirements or ‘stay at home’ orders,” the update continues.</p> <p>Western Washington University made a similar announcement last week, and students returned to class Jan. 24.</p> <p>“I am encouraged by recent news that new COVID-19 cases are decreasing rapidly across the country, with new cases falling more than 30% in places that were among the first to see a surge of the Omicron variant in December,” wrote WWU President Sabah Randhawa in an update.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Study: omicron-blocking antibodies
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/01/24/do-vaccine-boosters-work-against-omicron/
GIST	<p>Virus-fighting antibodies capable of blocking the omicron variant persist four months after a third shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, according to a new study.</p> <p>The study, which was published on a preprint server Saturday, gives a first hint about the durability of coronavirus vaccine protection, with a key line of immune defense remaining intact. The study has not yet been peer-reviewed and will need to be replicated and extended to a longer period.</p> <p>The laboratory study suggests a fourth shot may not be needed right away — a question that has caused anxiety for people wondering if and when they would need to get another booster.</p> <p>“This is very, very new for the field,” said Pei-Yong Shi, a microbiologist at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, whose team tested antibodies in the blood of vaccinated people against an omicron-like virus in collaboration with Pfizer scientists. “That really shows that at least up to four months, post-dose three, there is still substantial neutralizing activity against omicron.”</p> <p>Antibodies are known to drop off in the months after vaccination. The omicron variant drew special concern because even in the month after a second vaccine dose, when levels of virus-fighting antibodies should be near their peak, antibodies capable of blocking omicron were minimal, and even undetectable in many subjects. Those omicron-blocking antibodies were even less evident at the time people were about to receive a third dose.</p> <p>Multiple studies have shown this erosion.</p> <p>“You wait a month and check the blood, and almost-zilch neutralization activity against omicron,” said Duane R. Wesemann, an immunologist at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston who was not involved in the study.</p> <p>A third vaccine dose rebuilds that line of immune protection against the omicron variant, but just as important, it increases the breadth of the immune response by creating a more potent repertoire of antibodies — a process known as affinity maturation. This greater breadth of protection is thought to be a large part of why the third shot is so helpful against the variant.</p> <p>A major question had been how long that shored-up protection would last.</p> <p>During the four months after a booster shot of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, antibodies against the omicron variant did drop, the study found. But they remained high enough that, at least inferring from comparisons with other variants, they should continue to provide a layer of protection, Shi said.</p> <p>The big uncertainty, said Shane Crotty, a vaccine expert at La Jolla Institute for Immunology in California, is whether antibody levels continue to drop after four months, or eventually stabilize at some level.</p>

	<p>A study from Britain found that while protection against symptomatic infections is lower than for the delta variant, even after a third dose, protection against hospitalization remains high. That study found that protection against hospitalization dropped from 92 percent in the month after the third dose to 83 percent for people at 10 or more weeks after that shot.</p> <p>Israel began offering a fourth shot of the coronavirus vaccine from U.S. giant Pfizer and German partner BioNTech to people at risk for severe illness in December. But researchers announced at a recent news conference that while a fourth shot sends antibodies higher, it does not appear to provide greater protection against symptomatic infection.</p> <p>Pfizer and BioNTech said in a statement Monday that they will soon be testing both a fourth dose of the original vaccine and an omicron-specific booster shot in human trials.</p> <p>The companies plan to manufacture 4 billion doses of their vaccine this year, regardless of whether they continue to make the original shot or revise it to battle the omicron variant, they said.</p> <p>Antibodies are just one easily measurable component of the immune response, and protection against severe illness and hospitalization can remain intact even as the level of antibodies drops off.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/23 Racial bias in US Marshals Service?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/01/23/class-action-black-us-marshals/
GIST	<p>By the time a jury awarded him \$4 million, Matthew Fogg had spent about 13 years fighting to prove that racism derailed his career at the United States Marshals Service. Hearing the verdict in 1998, he wept.</p> <p>Weeks of testimony from more than 30 people had convinced jurors that Fogg was up against something pervasive: a “hostile” environment for Black employees, as a judge later summarized. Yet decades later, a class action bearing Fogg’s name — and in which more than 10,000 people may have a stake — continues to inch forward.</p> <p>The end is in sight, lawyers say. An administrative judge for the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the federal agency that investigates claims of workplace discrimination, could soon hear the evidence after years of procedural delay. But employees past and present awaiting the outcome say that any vindication will be tempered by disillusionment over the journey to this moment. Many class members have left the agency. Some are ailing and unable to testify, attorneys said. Others have died.</p> <p>“It’s a never-ending battle,” said Fogg, now 70. That it’s taken so long is unsurprising, he said, because “the culture of racism is so embedded in America — is so deep.”</p> <p>In interviews with The Washington Post, 15 current and former Black employees of the Marshals Service detailed allegations of racial bias that undercut career advancement. They say one of the country’s oldest federal law enforcement agencies — tasked with protecting courthouses, transporting prisoners, shielding witnesses and tracking down fugitives — has failed to confront decades of discrimination.</p> <p>They recounted stories of debilitating stress; needlessly contentious hiring interviews that could end after a single question; job openings suddenly closed after Black people rose to the top of the selection process; and indignation at training White newcomers who quickly became their supervisors. Some estimate they lost out on hundreds of thousands of dollars in income. Many remembered White colleagues telling racist jokes or using the n-word to demean fellow employees and prisoners of color, without apparent repercussions.</p> <p>The Marshals Service declined to answer questions about the class action or its members’ underlying complaints of institutional racism. A spokesman, James P. Stossel, deputy chief of public affairs, said agency policy does not allow officials to speak with the news media about ongoing litigation.</p>

Class members are seeking individual compensation and “systemic relief” — which lawyer Saba Bireda said should start with the Marshals Service vowing to change. “We’re really looking for a new system,” she said.

Responding to a federal discrimination lawsuit that overlapped with Fogg’s case, Justice Department officials in 2012 denied that the Marshals Service has a “long history of continuing discrimination” or that a “good old boy network” is biased against African Americans, court papers from that case show. Officials also argued then that the Marshals Service “took reasonable care to prevent and promptly correct race-based harassment.” The lawsuit was dismissed after lawyers for the plaintiffs said the pending EEOC case covered their claims, and some complainants reached individual settlements with the government, according to court documents.

Critics of the agency’s record on racial equity see an opening for change with the Biden administration’s [appointment of a new agency director](#), Ronald Davis, who as the former executive director of President Barack Obama’s policing task force has [denounced deep-rooted racism](#) in law enforcement. Davis is Black, as was his predecessor.

Two current Black employees of the Marshals Service, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of a fear of retaliation, said they believe discrimination remains a problem at the agency, echoing others who have retired in the past few years.

“There was a time where the overt racism was the predominant source of racism — you know, the nooses on people’s desks and that type of thing,” said one current employee, who recalled getting a promotion in the past few years only after filing an EEO complaint. “I think I’m kind of more in the era of institutionalized racism, where it’s built into the processes. People are nice to you in your face. When you peel all the layers back, the core of it’s still there and it’s still perpetuating.”

The other current employee said his managers have never acknowledged allegations of hiring discrimination he made against them in an EEO complaint. Officials did not find discrimination, but this employee believes the filing sent superiors scrambling to hire minorities.

“I know these people,” this person said. “Not one time did they come over to me and say, ‘Hey, that’s not how we are. That’s not *who* we are.’ ”

‘Bigots with badges’

Other federal law enforcement agencies have resolved similar long-running class actions alleging racial discrimination. The FBI [settled](#) and promised reforms in the 1990s. In 2017, the Secret Service [agreed to pay \\$24 million](#) to Black agents claiming bias in its promotion process.

The Marshals Service has been unwilling to come to the table in a similar way, said lawyer David Sanford, whose firm Sanford Heisler Sharp represents the class-action members — more than 700 current and former employees, plus thousands more unsuccessful job applicants. That the case has languished for so long is “unconscionable,” Sanford said.

The EEOC closed the case in 1997 but reopened it in 2006, [attributing](#) its earlier decision to a clerical misunderstanding. Lawyers expect to get a hearing date soon, though the class action could end in a settlement.

An equal-employment expert hired by plaintiffs in the federal lawsuit concluded that African Americans were significantly underrepresented in prestigious divisions and promotions from 2007 to 2012. The agency’s expert argued that the analysis was flawed and said that “borderline statistically significant” disparities in hiring decisions would vanish if not for just a few outcomes.

The Marshals Service has acknowledged some problems over the years, telling the EEOC in a 2000 report that it was reworking its deputy hiring exam after the test was found to have a “significant adverse impact” on African Americans. In the early 1990s, an agency report described a gap in job satisfaction between

Black and White employees, and widespread perceptions among personnel that a “good old boy network” disenfranchised minorities.

But lawyers behind the class action argue the Marshals Service has never meaningfully addressed Black employees’ concerns and said they are unaware of any broad review of the agency’s racial climate since the 1990s.

“What case goes on for 27 years, of this magnitude, and can be kept so quiet?” asked former D.C. deputy marshal Robert Byars, 63, who retired from the Marshals Service in 2020. He spent nearly two decades in lower-ranking and lower-paying positions before becoming a deputy — thwarted, he argued, by a culture where racism went unreported or unpunished.

Fogg eventually went public with his complaints about the Marshals Service. A 1997 New York Post series titled “Bigots with badges” featured Fogg and two partners — one Black, one White — who described rampant abuse, including racial slurs and threats for speaking out, as well as White colleagues using a picture of Martin Luther King Jr. for target practice. The Marshals Service declined to comment on the claims at the time.

[CBS News](#) covered the story 1999. The Marshals Service again declined to discuss specific claims but said it took discrimination complaints seriously.

“Is it fair to paint us with a broad brush just because there have been discrimination complaints filed?” Debbie Ridley, a Black official in the agency’s equal-employment office, said in an interview for CBS’s two-part series. “The answer to that is no. ... Do Black marshals feel that they have a problem being promoted in the Marshals Service? Yes, they do.”

Contacted recently, Ridley said she worked for the agency only briefly and did not remember enough from her tenure there to discuss the accusations of discrimination.

Louie McKinney, a longtime employee of the Marshals Service who served as acting director under President George W. Bush, said in an interview that racism remained a serious issue there when he left in the early 2000s. But “now ... things are different,” he said.

“We’ve got Black people in top jobs right now, you know. Things that I started years ago, so I’m very proud of that,” said McKinney, who was the second Black person to lead the agency and now serves as [president of the U.S. Marshals Service Association](#), an organization of current and retired employees.

‘I was tired of fighting’

In interviews, current and former employees gave detailed accounts of their allegations, some of which are described in the class-action complaint. The Marshals Service declined to discuss their individual claims. Paul Rivers joined the Marshals Service in 1990 after four years in the Marine Corps and experience in nuclear security. He was recognized with a Purple Heart after the Beirut barracks [bombing](#) that hospitalized him and killed 241 of his fellow service members.

Rivers was determined to get promoted, he said, and thinks he did everything right. He taught colleagues about weapons of mass destruction and helped write agency policy on them, he said. He took on extra projects and earned three college degrees while working, including a \$25,000 master’s in strategic leadership that sent him into debt.

Yet when Rivers left the Marshals Service in 2017, he said, he held the lowest possible rank for a supervisor. He said he had been stuck there about 15 years.

“Each time, you know, I put out the effort to improve myself, thinking ... ‘Let me try even harder,’ ” he said. “I put it on myself to push harder. And each time I was met with another brick wall.”

Rivers described a toxic culture in which some White colleagues showed open disdain for Black people.

“You know why they call that place Division Street?” Rivers recalled a high-ranking White official in the Marshals Service asking him during a stint in Orlando, referring to a road that once [separated Black and White neighborhoods](#). “Because Blacks were on one side and Whites were on the other, and they knew their place.”

The former official, when reached by The Post, acknowledged having told others about the street but never using those words. Rivers said he didn’t report the comments right away because at the time, he was battling the agency over his eligibility for a top-secret security clearance, which he said had been called into question after someone put false information in a background investigation, including a claim that Rivers had schizophrenia. By the time he felt he could report the “Division Street” comments, he said, staff at the Marshals Service headquarters told him it was too late.

In 2017, Rivers said, he retired early, sick of watching less qualified White colleagues get preferential treatment and “continue up the ladder where I got left behind.”

“You can only keep hitting that wall with your head so many times before your head starts to hurt,” said Rivers, now in his 50s. After years of fruitless complaints, he said, “I was tired of fighting.”

Former Georgia criminal investigator deputy Regina Holsey recalled her first day on the job in 1995, when the White receptionist asked if Holsey was a “voluntary surrender.” Fifteen years later, Holsey said, she was disrespected again when a position was abruptly canceled within minutes of her completing what she felt had been a strong interview. The job reopened months later with a more advanced Spanish-language requirement — she no longer qualified — and went to a White Hispanic colleague who, she said, ridiculed her driving and said she was like the “little Black lady on ‘Police Academy.’ ” She declined to identify the colleague.

An expert who analyzed several years of “canceled” positions for the agency as part of the now-dismissed lawsuit said that six out of 37 had Black candidates ranked first for the job.

Tracy Bryce, who left in 2015 after holding the same position in D.C. for two decades, said she eventually stopped applying for the higher-paying job of deputy marshal. Once, Bryce said, officials told her that she had to interview in Ohio, and she paid to fly there, only to realize later that White candidates for deputy were interviewed in D.C.

Another time, Bryce said, a hiring panel asked her one question — “Do you drink alcohol?” — and refused to accept her response that, no, she did not. Bryce said the interview was ended at that point.

White colleagues used the n-word for Black prisoners into the 2000s, Bryce said, even addressing people with the slur while giving commands. One of the agency’s current employees detailed several instances of White colleagues using the n-word, including to describe another member of the agency.

The class action touches on alleged racist comments only in passing, but its members recounted a range of offensive language, including White deputies who called Black colleagues “boy” and “monkey man.” They also mentioned repeated problems with violence against Black inmates in one cellblock in D.C.

“I think that the code of silence pervades, and people thought perhaps they could get away with events like this,” a federal judge said in 2008, noting the many Marshals Service members in the courtroom as she sentenced Stephen Cook, a White former deputy in D.C., to 24 months in prison for beating a handcuffed Black man.

When a deputy was recorded calling a suspect the n-word in 2018, the Marshals Service put the Ohio employee on administrative leave and [said](#) it had “zero tolerance for this type of behavior, which does not represent our agency’s core values of justice, integrity and service.” Later that year, an official said the unidentified employee was no longer with the agency, [local media reported](#).

Bryce, 55, said that many Black employees of the Marshals Service stopped reporting incidents because “nothing got done.” But she said she felt compelled to do so when, for the first time in her Marshals Service career, a White colleague made her fear for her safety. She said she was escorting prisoners sometime in the 2000s — wearing a black suit, carrying a briefcase — when a White deputy walked up and demanded that she show ID. When Bryce refused, she said, the deputy shoved her against a wall.

Bryce said she made a written report on the incident and told her superiors but does not believe the White deputy faced discipline. The Post was unable to reach the man she claims shoved her.

Former Black employees who advanced into leadership positions while at the agency also said their path was harder. Thomas Hedgepeth, who led an office in D.C., said officials took just long enough to clear him of misconduct allegations that he had to relinquish a promotion, after missing a day of training.

Sylvester Jones said he was confirmed as one of the agency’s first African American assistant directors — but only following a months-long delay, after an anonymous complaint raised allegations of misconduct that already had been investigated and rejected.

Jones contrasted his experience with that of White colleagues. One, Jones said, was so confident he’d get a job that he put his house on the market. Another, who joined the agency a few years after Jones, had two big promotions announced a day apart.

McKinney, the former acting director, recalled having to fight for Jones’s appointment when White colleagues sought to derail the confirmation process. “I’m the director. ... He’s very well qualified. ... So why can’t he have the job?” he said.

‘They have an opportunity’

Former deputy Randy Foster said he applied for more than 50 promotions over roughly two decades. He received only a handful of interviews, he said, despite an extensive military background, experience in law enforcement and high-profile assignments protecting Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia and the judge who sentenced conspirators in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. Foster, too, recounted positions “canceled” when he was marked a top candidate.

Now 58, he said his old agency owes justice to people “putting their life on the line.”

Three class-action members Foster knew have died. He ticks through all the presidencies the case has outlasted: Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump.

“Doesn’t matter what political party is in office, discrimination is wrong,” Foster said. “And they have an opportunity.”

On a recent conference panel of Black professionals held over Zoom, Fogg was introduced simply as a retired member of the Marshals Service. But his long war against the agency loomed over the discussion on social justice and policing. Behind Fogg was a copy of the New York Post’s “Bigots with badges” Sunday cover story from 1997.

A mix of current and former members of law enforcement talked about their dreams of changing stubborn systems from within. They spoke about the Black Lives Matter movement that had put a new national spotlight on the issues they raised many years ago.

Individual officers’ actions are “a pebble in the ocean,” one panelist lamented. “You know, as opposed to really looking at the root causes of things.”

“I still have to be very careful speaking out,” said one Black police official. “Because again, I have bills to pay.” The speaker warned about people who find creative ways to “get rid of you.”

Fogg said he had seen it all.

	<p>“When you really take a stand against that institution, you know they’re gonna come after you,” he said.</p> <p>“All of us know that.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 New version omicron; more dangerous?
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/01/24/covid-omicron-ba2/
GIST	<p>As a new version of the highly contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus spreads in parts of Asia and Europe, the World Health Organization recommended Monday that officials begin investigating its characteristics to determine whether it poses new challenges for pandemic-weary nations.</p> <p>Known as BA. 2, the new version of the virus is a descendant of the omicron variant responsible for huge surges of covid-19 in the United States and elsewhere around the globe. Virologists are referring to the original omicron variant as BA. 1.</p> <p>“The BA. 2 descendant lineage, which differs from BA. 1 in some of the mutations, including in the spike protein, is increasing in many countries,” the WHO wrote on its website. “Investigations into the characteristics of BA. 2, including immune escape properties and virulence, should be prioritized independently (and comparatively) to BA. 1.”</p> <p>Viruses mutate constantly, mostly in harmless ways. There is no current evidence that BA. 2 is more virulent, spreads faster or escapes immunity better than BA. 1.</p> <p>“Variants have come, variants have gone,” said Robert Garry, a virologist at Tulane University School of Medicine. “I don’t think there’s any reason to think this one is a whole lot worse than the current version of omicron.”</p> <p>BA. 2 has been detected in India, Denmark and Britain, among other countries, according to health officials and media reports abroad. In Europe, it appears the most widespread in Denmark, but that may be because the Scandinavian nation has a robust program of sequencing the virus’s genome.</p> <p>At least three cases have been found in the United States at Houston Methodist Hospital in Texas, which also is studying the genetic makeup of virus samples from its patients.</p> <p>“The good news is we have only three,” said James Musser, director of the Center for Molecular and Translational Human Infectious Diseases Research at Houston Methodist. “We certainly do not see the 5 percent and more that is being reported in the U.K. now and certainly not the 40 percent that is being reported in Denmark.”</p> <p>But Musser said BA. 2 deserves close attention because little is known about it yet.</p> <p>“We know that omicron ... can clearly evade preexisting immunity” from both vaccines and exposure to other variants of the virus, he said. “What we don’t know yet is whether son-of-omicron does that better or worse than omicron. So that’s an open question.”</p> <p>On Monday, more than 695,000 new coronavirus infections were reported and testing shows that almost all are from omicron. Still, that total is down 13.7 percent from the week prior, according to a seven-day average of data tracked by The Washington Post.</p> <p>Kristen Nordlund, a spokeswoman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said, “Although the BA.2 lineage has recently increased in proportion in some countries, it remains a very low proportion of circulating viruses in the United States and globally. Currently, there are insufficient data to determine whether the BA.2 lineage is more transmissible or has a fitness advantage over the BA.1 lineage. CDC continues to monitor variants that are circulating both domestically and internationally.”</p>

	<p>Anders Fomsgaard a virologist at the State Serum Institute in Denmark, said in an email Monday that BA. 2 has become the dominant form of the virus in his nation of nearly 6 million people, where it now accounts for about 65 percent of new cases as BA. 1 is on the decline.</p> <p>At the same time, Fomsgaard said, “we are not so concerned, since we so far do not see major differences in age distribution, vaccination status, breakthrough infections and risk of hospitalization. Also, despite the high infection rate of BA. 2, the numbers of hospitalizations [in] ICUs are decreasing.”</p> <p>The United Kingdom Health Security Agency identified more than 400 cases of BA. 2 in the first 10 days of January and on Friday designated BA. 2 a “virus under investigation,” according to Al Jazeera. The agency said BA. 2 has been identified in 40 countries and “there is still uncertainty around the significance of the changes to the viral genome.”</p> <p>Some scientists have dubbed BA. 2 the “stealth omicron” because it has genetic traits that make it more difficult to identify the omicron form of the virus on PCR tests.</p> <p>A French epidemiologist told Agence France-Presse that “what surprised us is the rapidity with which this sub-variant, which has been circulating to a great extent in Asia, has taken hold in Denmark.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Texas: stealth omicron variant emerges
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2022/01/24/covid-omicron-ba2/
GIST	<p>As a new version of the highly contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus spreads in parts of Asia and Europe, the World Health Organization recommended Monday that officials begin investigating its characteristics to determine whether it poses new challenges for pandemic-weary nations.</p> <p>Known as BA. 2, the new version of the virus is a descendant of the omicron variant responsible for huge surges of covid-19 in the United States and elsewhere around the globe. Virologists are referring to the original omicron variant as BA. 1.</p> <p>“The BA. 2 descendant lineage, which differs from BA. 1 in some of the mutations, including in the spike protein, is increasing in many countries,” the WHO wrote on its website. “Investigations into the characteristics of BA. 2, including immune escape properties and virulence, should be prioritized independently (and comparatively) to BA. 1.”</p> <p>Viruses mutate constantly, mostly in harmless ways. There is no current evidence that BA. 2 is more virulent, spreads faster or escapes immunity better than BA. 1.</p> <p>“Variants have come, variants have gone,” said Robert Garry, a virologist at Tulane University School of Medicine. “I don’t think there’s any reason to think this one is a whole lot worse than the current version of omicron.”</p> <p>BA. 2 has been detected in India, Denmark and Britain, among other countries, according to health officials and media reports abroad. In Europe, it appears the most widespread in Denmark, but that may be because the Scandinavian nation has a robust program of sequencing the virus’s genome.</p> <p>At least three cases have been found in the United States at Houston Methodist Hospital in Texas, which also is studying the genetic makeup of virus samples from its patients.</p> <p>“The good news is we have only three,” said James Musser, director of the Center for Molecular and Translational Human Infectious Diseases Research at Houston Methodist. “We certainly do not see the 5 percent and more that is being reported in the U.K. now and certainly not the 40 percent that is being reported in Denmark.”</p> <p>But Musser said BA. 2 deserves close attention because little is known about it yet.</p>

“We know that omicron ... can clearly evade preexisting immunity” from both vaccines and exposure to other variants of the virus, he said. “What we don’t know yet is whether son-of-omicron does that better or worse than omicron. So that’s an open question.”

On Monday, more than 695,000 new coronavirus infections were reported and testing shows that almost all are from omicron. Still, that total is down 13.7 percent from the week prior, according to a seven-day average of data tracked by [The Washington Post](#).

Kristen Nordlund, a spokeswoman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said, “Although the BA.2 lineage has recently increased in proportion in some countries, it remains a very low proportion of circulating viruses in the United States and globally. Currently, there are insufficient data to determine whether the BA.2 lineage is more transmissible or has a fitness advantage over the BA.1 lineage. CDC continues to monitor variants that are circulating both domestically and internationally.”

Anders Fomsgaard a virologist at the State Serum Institute in Denmark, said in an email Monday that BA. 2 has become the dominant form of the virus in his nation of nearly 6 million people, where it now accounts for about 65 percent of new cases as BA. 1 is on the decline.

At the same time, Fomsgaard said, “we are not so concerned, since we so far do not see major differences in age distribution, vaccination status, breakthrough infections and risk of hospitalization. Also, despite the high infection rate of BA. 2, the numbers of hospitalizations [in] ICUs are decreasing.”

The United Kingdom Health Security Agency identified more than 400 cases of BA. 2 in the first 10 days of January and on Friday designated BA. 2 a “virus under investigation,” according to [Al Jazeera](#). The agency said BA. 2 has been identified in 40 countries and “there is still uncertainty around the significance of the changes to the viral genome.”

Some scientists have dubbed BA. 2 the “stealth omicron” because it has genetic traits that make it more difficult to identify the omicron form of the virus on PCR tests.

A French epidemiologist told [Agence France-Presse](#) that “what surprised us is the rapidity with which this sub-variant, which has been circulating to a great extent in Asia, has taken hold in Denmark.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 NATO steps up readiness in eastern Europe
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/world/europe/ukraine-nato-russia-embassies.html
GIST	<p>KYIV — NATO said on Monday that some member countries were putting their forces on standby and sending additional ships and fighter jets to Eastern Europe to reassure allies in the region, as Britain joined the United States in ordering families of diplomats out of Ukraine, citing “the growing threat from Russia.”</p> <p>The moves signaled rising fears of a potential Russian military intervention in Ukraine, as well as increasing concerns about the Kremlin flexing its muscles farther afield. Russian troops and equipment are pouring into neighboring Belarus for planned exercises next month that U.S. officials fear are not only directed at Ukraine, but also intended to intimidate NATO countries on Belarus’s western border, like Poland and the Baltic countries.</p> <p>U.S. intelligence officials have said they do not believe President Vladimir V. Putin has made a decision to attack Ukraine, and Russian diplomats have repeatedly said there are no plans to do so.</p> <p>But with a month’s negotiations between Moscow and Washington at an apparent impasse, Russia and the West increasingly seem to be talking past one another. Even as the White House prepares written responses to Russia’s demands on limiting NATO’s footprint in Europe, the Biden administration is</p>

considering deploying several thousand U.S. troops, as well as warships and aircraft, to NATO allies in the Baltics and Eastern Europe.

The NATO announcement on Monday consolidated pledges and actions that member states have made over the last several days. They include an offer by France to send troops to Romania under NATO command; Denmark sending F-16 jets to Lithuania; the Netherlands sending two F-35 jets to Bulgaria to help with air policing; and Spain sending a frigate to the Black Sea.

The European Union also announced further financial aid to Ukraine of some 1.2 billion euros, or \$1.36 billion, to help the country during this crisis.

NATO members bordering Russia and Belarus, or near the contested Black Sea in the south, have asked for more allied troops and equipment to build up deterrence against any potential aggression by Russia. That would be in addition to the 5,000 or so NATO troops already stationed in Poland and the three Baltic nations that were installed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, in what NATO called an “enhanced forward presence.”

There was no indication in NATO’s statement on Monday that any additional forces deployed in Central, Eastern or Southern Europe would be used to support Ukraine, which is not a NATO member, in the event of a Russian invasion. Western officials have made clear that NATO forces would not engage militarily against Russia, and the Biden administration has said that goes for the United States as well.

On Monday, NATO and Russia blamed each other for inflaming tensions.

“This all leads to tensions rising,” the Kremlin’s spokesman, Dmitri S. Peskov, said in reference to the moves by NATO to strengthen its eastern flank. “This is not happening because of what we, Russia, are doing. This is all happening because of what NATO and the United States are doing.”

Jens Stoltenberg, the NATO secretary general, said in a statement that NATO would “continue to take all necessary measures to protect and defend all Allies, including by reinforcing the eastern part of the Alliance.” The statement added: “We will always respond to any deterioration of our security environment, including through strengthening our collective defense.”

The mobilization by the West comes in response to what Western countries say is a buildup of Russian forces larger than any seen since the end of the Cold War. Ukraine’s military intelligence service calculates that 127,000 troops are massed on the Ukrainian border and thousands more are expected to arrive in Belarus for next month’s exercises, along with tanks, artillery and fighter planes.

But the buildup near Ukraine is only one part of what increasingly appears to be a global activation of Russian forces.

Last week, the Russian defense ministry announced that more than 140 ships and 10,000 sailors would take part in a series of live-fire naval exercises in February across the world, including off the Irish coast. The goal, according to the ministry, is to “protect Russia’s national interests in the world’s oceans.”

On Monday, the Russian Navy announced the start of exercises in the Baltic Sea involving 20 warships, and the government of Ireland said it had raised concerns with Moscow about its plans to carry out naval exercises off the Irish coast next month.

Even as NATO countries were stepping up their readiness, the Ukrainian government tried to project a business-as-usual image. It criticized the United States’ decision to order family members of the U.S. embassy staff to leave Ukraine, calling it “premature” and the result of “excessive caution.”

But other countries were also exercising caution in Kyiv, Ukraine’s capital. Britain said that it, too, would withdraw family members of diplomats, and there were reports that Germany and Australia were working to draw down their embassies.

“A serious change in the security situation of late has not occurred,” Oleg Nikolenko, the spokesman for Ukraine’s foreign ministry, said in a statement. “The threat of a new wave of Russian aggression has been permanent since 2014, and the build up of Russian forces on the state border began in April last year.”

While the United States has warned that Mr. Putin could order an attack at any time, Ukraine’s government has shown less sense of urgency and at times has presented contradictory assessments of the situation.

In his statement, Mr. Nikolenko, the foreign ministry spokesman, suggested that giving into panic would simply give Russia a victory as it attempts to sow discord through information warfare.

“The Russian Federation is currently working actively to destabilize the internal situation in Ukraine,” he said. “In this situation, it is important to soberly evaluate the risks and preserve calm.”

Despite the pullout of family members and some personnel, both the American and British Embassies have been ordered to remain open.

Meeting on Monday, European Union foreign ministers issued a statement repeating their call for Russia to respect international law, de-escalate tensions and negotiate. A further incursion into Ukraine would mean “massive consequences and severe costs,” they said.

With Western countries threatening sanctions, worries about a possible war are already taking their toll on Russia’s economy. On Monday, Russia’s RTS stock index dropped more than 8 percent, while the ruble fell more than 2 percent against the dollar to its weakest level in more than a year.

In an op-ed in Ukraine’s Ukrainska Pravda newspaper on Monday, a group of Ukrainian military experts said Russia was at least two to three weeks away from deploying all the forces it would need to launch a large-scale military operation but added there would likely not be sufficient forces to capture and hold significant territory.

A more likely scenario, the experts said, would be smaller scale operations, possibly a military escalation in the breakaway territories in eastern Ukraine, an exacerbation of the conflict in the Sea of Azov or rocket attacks on critical infrastructure and military targets.

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HEADLINE	01/24 Germany: eco-leftists, far-right in coalition
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/world/europe/germany-vaccine-mandate-antivax-movement.html
GIST	<p>NUREMBERG, Germany — Maria Liebermann came wrapped in fairy lights and waved a peace flag featuring a white dove. Martin Schmidt carried a Germany flag with the word RESIST scrawled across it in capital letters.</p> <p>She is a self-described “eco-leftist.” He votes for the far-right Alternative for Germany. They disagree on everything from immigration to climate change, but on a recent Monday they marched side by side against the prospect of a general Covid vaccine mandate, shouting “Freedom!”</p> <p>At the start of the pandemic, Germany was widely lauded as a model of unity in combating the coronavirus. A general trust in government encouraged citizens to comply with lockdowns, mask guidance and social distancing restrictions.</p> <p>But that confidence in the authorities has steadily waned as the pandemic enters its third year and the fight has shifted toward vaccines, exposing deep rifts in German society and setting back efforts to combat Covid cases.</p>

Plans by the new German chancellor, Olaf Scholz, to make the vaccine mandatory have galvanized a nationwide protest movement, mobilizing tens of thousands in marches in cities and villages every week even as Covid cases surge to new highs with the spread of the Omicron variant.

Germany, with a vaccination rate of 69 percent, has the largest share of unvaccinated people among big Western European nations, and its organized resistance to vaccines may be more pronounced than anywhere else in Europe.

Most Germans back not just vaccinations but also a vaccine mandate, but the opposition has forged an alliance of strange bedfellows that stretches across the political spectrum. Much of its center of gravity remains on the far right, giving new momentum to the Alternative for Germany, or AfD, a party best known for its anti-immigrant views.

But the opposition is not limited to an extremist fringe. Anti-vax nationalists, neo-Nazis and hooligans are joined by hippies, so-called esoterics and many ordinary citizens spooked by two years of lockdowns, curfews and the prospect of a mandate.

They can all be found, sometimes marching just a few feet apart, from Berlin and Hamburg in the north to Stuttgart and Munich in the south, and across towns and villages in east and west alike. This past week, some 100,000 protested, according to police estimates, in hundreds of decentralized demonstrations.

The diversity of the anti-vax movement was on display one recent Monday night in the Bavarian city of Nuremberg, where the crowd wound its way through the city center, banging drums, blowing whistles and, in at least one case, offering “cosmic energy” to bystanders.

There were naturalists and a smattering of neo-Nazis — men holding up placards against the “Great Reset,” code for antisemitic conspiracy theories — as well as plenty of families with children, and retirees carrying their own hand-drawn signs.

“We are no guinea pigs,” one sign read. “Hands off our children,” read another. One slogan that featured prominently: “Freedom, liberty and democracy.”

Ms. Liebermann, a 64-year-old retired physiotherapist, was among the demonstrators, blowing kisses to people watching the march from their windows.

“We are standing up for our constitutional rights,” she said. “A vaccine is an invasion of bodily integrity. It’s perverse that the state, which is supposed to protect its citizens, wants to force-vaccinate us.”

Asked whether it bothered her that some of her fellow protesters were not shy about their far-right views, Ms. Liebermann shrugged defiantly. “This march is a mirror of society,” she said. “The AfD is part of society. We are all here to demonstrate against a vaccine mandate.”

German politicians had long ruled out a vaccine mandate. But even as studies show that vaccination is the most effective way to prevent a Covid infection — and to avoid hospitalization or death if infected — persuading those who are deeply skeptical of vaccines has proved all but impossible.

Oliver Nachtwey, a sociologist at the University of Basel who has studied Germany’s coronavirus protest movement, calls the low vaccination rate “political noncompliance.”

“People are resisting the vaccinations,” Mr. Nachtwey said. “It’s a new and surprising movement because it connects two very separate milieus — people who have an alternative background and maybe voted Green or on the left before, and people who are on the hard right.”

In the former Communist East, the anti-vax movement has been fueled mainly by a far-right ecosystem that ranges from the AfD to neo-Nazi groups like the Free Saxons and the Third Way, which have called for leading politicians to be “hanged.” The governors of two eastern states have received death threats from vaccine opponents in recent weeks.

In western Germany, the picture is more complicated.

A well-established tradition of homeopathy and natural cures has meant that a certain distrust of science and medicine has long been widely accepted in Germany’s middle class. Homeopathic doctors are commonplace, their services reimbursed by public health insurers. Germany’s new age esoteric industry — books, crystals, courses and the like — brings in an estimated 20 billion euros in revenue a year. Bavaria has the highest number of certified healers in the country.

Add to that a streak of romanticism regarding nature that dates to Germany’s industrialization in the 19th century, and the German backlash against the vaccine is in some ways more mainstream than marginal, said Miro Dittrich, founder and senior researcher at CeMAS, a Berlin-based research organization focused on disinformation and conspiracy theories.

“We were looking for the problem on the fringes of society, but it was always in our middle,” Mr. Dittrich said.

“There is a certain regressive and unscientific worldview that comes from the esoteric corner where alternative cures have long been mainstreamed in a certain Green and lefty nonconformist milieu,” he added. “These are middle-class people who trust their feelings more than they trust experts, and in the pandemic that’s a problem.”

Unlike in the United States, where the anti-vax movement in many ways overlaps neatly with the Republican Party, in Germany no political party has been able to capture the disparate groups of people taking to the streets.

“In Germany we still don’t have the group polarization we’re seeing in the U.S.,” said Edgar Grande, the founding director of the Center for Civil Society Research at the WZB Social Science Center in Berlin. “One part votes for the AfD. But it’s mostly people who no longer feel represented by any party or group. They are politically homeless.”

Sophia, a 22-year-old who described herself as an “energetic healer,” and who was chatting to friends about an hour before the Nuremberg march, lamented the lack of opposition coming from parties on the left like the Greens that had traditionally challenged the status quo.

“Now they’re all backing the vaccine mandate,” she said. In the recent German election, Sophia, who declined to give her last name, supported the Basis party, a newly founded anti-vax party that garnered less than 3 percent of the vote.

Sophia comes from a family of doctors, and both her parents and her older brother got fully vaccinated and have urged her to do the same. But she is concerned that the vaccine was developed too fast, and doesn’t trust the government to disclose any serious side effects.

“My body is telling me that this is not a good idea,” she said. “I have a pretty good connection to my body.”

Her friends concurred. “It’s not about keeping us healthy, it’s about giving us all a QR code,” said Stefan, a 35-year-old father of five who advocates civil disobedience and also did not want his full name used. “They rule with fear. It’s a kind of tyranny.”

“Mainstream science is a religion,” he added.

	<p>Distrust in “mainstream science,” and mainstream politics, is one thing esoterics and the far right can agree on, said Mr. Grande of the WZB.</p> <p>“The common denominator is distrust,” he said. “What unites these two very different groups is an alienation from traditional parties, from science, from media.”</p> <p>Mr. Grande said the high levels of trust in government shown by Germans early in the pandemic, when nine in 10 backed the coronavirus restrictions, began to erode after the first lockdown as weariness with the pandemic set in.</p> <p>The danger now, Mr. Grande said, is that the weekly contact with the far right on the streets normalizes that group for those who belong to what he calls “the distrustful center.” Both camps share a belief in conspiracy theories, which have the power to radicalize the movement beyond the fringes.</p> <p>The vaccine mandate, which will be debated in parliament at the end of the month, is the decisive driver of the protests. “The debate about vaccine mandate is oil into the fire of the radicalization,” Mr. Grande said.</p> <p>“I fear we have a difficult political phase ahead of us in this pandemic,” he said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/25 Guessing game: Ukraine troops on edge
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/world/europe/ukraine-russia-frontline.html
GIST	<p>SVITLODARSK, Ukraine — The Ukrainian soldiers watch and wait, nervously peering through a periscope from an icy trench at a forward observation post in eastern Ukraine.</p> <p>Western governments have sounded alarms that Russia is prepared to attack Ukraine at any time. The Biden administration is considering moving troops, warships and artillery into Eastern Europe and NATO announced on Monday that member countries are sending ships and jets to the region.</p> <p>But how, exactly, military action might start has become an anxious guessing game for military analysts, for Western and Ukrainian officials — and not least for Ukrainian soldiers, who are likely to be the first to find out.</p> <p>“I would rather have peace,” said Ihor, a sergeant who is the Ukrainian unit’s cook and offered only his first name and rank, in keeping with military rules. “I have two kids at home.”</p> <p>If an incursion does come, most military analysts agree it won’t begin with a massive show of force — tanks rolling over the border or a sudden and devastating strike from the air. Rather, it would start with a more ambiguous, limited action that Moscow would use as justification for a wider intervention.</p> <p>Such an action, American and Ukrainian officials say, could come in many different forms — the seizure by Russian-backed separatists of a disputed piece of infrastructure, like an electrical plant, for instance.</p> <p>It could even start invisibly, with gas wafting through the air, if Russia decided to stage an accident at an ammonia plant in this area, and then send in troops under the guise of bringing it under control. That possibility was raised this month by Ukraine’s military intelligence agency.</p> <p>Ukraine estimates that Russia has about 127,000 troops near its borders. The buildup, said Dmitry Adamsky, an expert on Russian security policy at Reichman University in Israel, “is visible enough to let people imagine a range of scenarios that might happen. At the same time, it’s uncertain enough to conceal the strategic intention.”</p> <p>Russia has repeatedly denied in recent weeks that it has plans to invade Ukraine and said it is Russia whose security is threatened — by NATO exercises near its borders and weapons shipments to Ukraine.</p>

Analysts say Russia has [a rich repertoire of tricks that make it all but impossible to guess a first move](#). It demonstrated that with its first incursion into Ukraine in 2014. At the time, masked, mysterious soldiers appeared in Crimea in a military intervention that Russia initially denied but later acknowledged. Russian soldiers said to be “vacationing” or “volunteering,” turned up in eastern Ukraine later that year.

In fact, nearly every Soviet and Russian military intervention of the past half century, from the Prague Spring to Afghanistan to the war in Chechnya, has begun with an operation of disguise or misdirection, intended to sow confusion.

A limited incursion might also serve Moscow’s goal of dividing NATO allies, with some countries seeing the action as insufficient cause to sanction Russia, and others disagreeing. President Biden last week hinted at potential divisions within the Western alliance over how to react to a provocation that falls short of an invasion — comments that the U.S. then tried to walk back after a backlash from Europe.

For soldiers in the East, where Ukraine has been fighting Russian-backed separatists for nearly eight years, the lack of clarity has made for a nerve-racking time.

“Maybe it will happen here,” said Lt. Sergei Goshko, who is responsible for civilian affairs on this part of the frontline, and was thus authorized to provide his full name. “Maybe it will happen south of here.”

“But we cannot know everything,” he added. “It’s a game of chess where you cannot see the moves in advance. Who will do what to whom? We don’t know.”

In one ominous hint of how Russia might justify an invasion, its ambassador to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Konstantin Gavrillov, said Sunday that Moscow would respond if its citizens were threatened. Russia has granted citizenship to tens of thousands of people on the separatist side of the eastern Ukraine conflict, any of whom might suffer in an escalation.

“We won’t tolerate it if they attack our citizens,” Mr. Gavrillov said. There wouldn’t be another warning, he said. “Only dogs bark. A wolf bites, and that is it.”

Ukrainian officials and U.S. diplomats have focused on one possibility in particular in the region: an accident at one of the most dangerous industrial sites in eastern Ukraine, an ammonia gas factory in separatist-held territory a few miles from the Ukrainian frontlines.

Ammonia is a component of fertilizer but can be lethal in high concentrations.

A chemical leak releasing a toxic plume is one prime possibility, potentially poisoning soldiers and civilians on both sides of the front, officials say. It might justify, for example, a Russian deployment of emergency cleanup crews with an escort of soldiers.

In December, Russia’s defense minister, Sergei K. Shoigu, said, without providing evidence, that American mercenaries had brought unspecified chemicals into eastern Ukraine. That suggested he might be laying the groundwork to blame a poisonous gas leak on the Western-backed Ukrainian government.

Ukrainian officials, meanwhile, have publicly warned that Russia shipped canisters of gas to the factory site, adding to vast stockpiles already there. The sprawling, rusty factory is poised for an accident, they say.

With both Russia and Ukraine now talking about chemical leaks in this area, local authorities have plans to sound a siren to warn civilians, though it is unclear how they might protect themselves other than closing windows.

But a gas leak is just one possibility. Causes for escalation in eastern Ukraine along the front abound, said Maria Zolkina, a Ukrainian political analyst, including the possibility of a limited advance by the separatists to seize disputed infrastructure such as waterworks or power plants.

Hostilities could also start with a naval clash in the Azov Sea, where Ukrainian and Russian vessels operate in close proximity, or a so-called false flag attack that would target Russian-speaking citizens in separatists areas. Analysts say a purely political casus belli could also arise, such as a Russian claim that American, British and other NATO countries are providing weapons to Ukraine that pose a risk to Russian security.

A limited action might exert political pressure on the Ukrainian government to accede to Moscow's terms for a settlement in eastern Ukraine, which would require admitting figures from the Russian-backed separatist movement into Ukraine's Parliament. Or it could presage a wider intervention: Russian airstrikes, amphibious landings or a tank assault across the border from Belarus, a Russian ally.

At the Ukrainian position on this section of the Eastern front, the surrounding landscape is an open, snowy steppe. Soldiers keep watch for infantry or tanks.

Mindful of the ammonia factory six miles away, they also keep gas masks ready, though they do not carry them every day, said Lieutenant Stepan, the commander.

Out in the open fields, a freezing wind rustled the dry grass and shadows of clouds played across the empty flatlands. All was quiet on a recent visit by Ukrainian and foreign reporters.

Soldiers milled about, wearing white snow camouflage suits over their coats, looking puffy, like marshmallow men with rifles.

A sergeant, who also offered only his first name, Nikolai, said he was ready to fight, however the conflict might begin. But he hoped not to.

"A more active phase of the war means more death," he said. "More parents without children, more children without parents. We really don't want Russia to invade."

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HEADLINE	01/24 African Cup match human crush kills 6
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/world/africa/african-cup-crush-cameroon.html
GIST	<p>YAOUNDÉ, Cameroon — At least six people died in a crush outside a stadium in Cameroon hosting a game in Africa's top soccer tournament on Monday, a local government official said, realizing fears over the nation's capacity to stage the continent's biggest sporting event.</p> <p>Naseri Paul Biya, the governor of the central region of Cameroon, said there could be more deaths reported.</p> <p>"We are not in position to give you the total number of casualties," he said.</p> <p>The crush happened as crowds struggled to get access to Olembe Stadium in Yaoundé, the capital, to watch Cameroon play Comoros in the African Cup of Nations.</p> <p>Officials at the nearby Messassi hospital said they received at least 40 injured people, who were rushed there by police and civilians. The officials said the hospital wasn't capable of treating them all.</p> <p>"Some of the injured are in desperate condition," said Olinga Prudence, a nurse. "We will have to evacuate them to a specialized hospital."</p>

People were seen lying motionless on their backs near an entrance to the stadium in the aftermath of the crush. A man knelt next to one of the victims and appeared to be trying to resuscitate the person. Shoes, caps and colorful wigs — part of some of the fans’ game attire — were strewn on the ground.

Witnesses said children were among those caught up in the crush. They said it happened when stewards closed the gates and stopped allowing people into the stadium. It was not immediately clear if the crush happened before or during the game.

Soccer officials said around 50,000 people had tried to attend the match. The stadium has a capacity of 60,000, but it was not meant to be more than 80 percent full for the game due to pandemic-related restrictions.

The Confederation of African Football, which runs the tournament, said in a statement it was aware of the incident.

“CAF is currently investigating the situation and trying to get more details on what transpired,” it said. “We are in constant communication with Cameroon government and the Local Organizing Committee.”

One of the federation’s top officials, the general secretary Veron Mosengo-Omba, went to visit injured fans in the hospital, the statement said.

Cameroon is hosting the African Cup of Nations for the first time in 50 years. The nation was meant to host the tournament in 2019, but the event was rescinded and awarded to Egypt because of serious concerns with Cameroon’s preparations, particularly the readiness of its stadiums.

Olembe Stadium was one of the venues that had been under scrutiny. It is the main stadium for the monthlong tournament and will stage three more games, including the final on Feb. 6.

Monday’s incident was the second serious blow to Cameroon in the space of a day, after at least 17 people died when a fire set off a series of explosions at a nightclub in Yaoundé on Sunday.

Following that incident, President Paul Biya of Cameroon urged the country to be on guard while it hosts its biggest sports event in decades.

Cameroon won Monday’s game 2-1 to move on to the quarterfinals.

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HEADLINE	01/24 UK warns of ‘unprecedented sanctions’
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/25/us-uk-and-europe-totally-united-in-the-face-of-russia-threat-to-ukraine-biden-says
GIST	<p>US president Joe Biden has insisted there was “total” unity among western powers after crisis talks with European leaders on how to deter Russia from an attack against Ukraine, as Downing Street warned of “unprecedented sanctions” against Moscow should an invasion take place. .</p> <p>“I had a very, very, very good meeting – total unanimity with all the European leaders,” Biden told reporters shortly after finishing a one hour and 20 minute video conference on Monday with allied leaders from Europe and Nato.</p> <p>The US has put 8,500 troops on high alert to deploy to Europe as Nato reinforced its eastern borders amid growing tensions over Ukraine.</p> <p>In London, prime minister Boris Johnson’s office also said “the leaders agreed on the importance of international unity in the face of growing Russian hostility.”</p>

Downing Street said the group stressed that diplomatic discussions with Russia remain the first priority, but said the nation would be hit with “swift retributive responses” if a “further Russian incursion into Ukraine” takes place.

“The leaders agreed that, should a further Russian incursion into Ukraine happen, allies must enact swift retributive responses including an unprecedented package of sanctions,” Downing Street said following the discussions lasting over an hour.

Washington is trying to maintain transatlantic and Nato unity against Russia, which supplies about 40% of the European Union’s natural gas.

The meeting came days after Biden revealed behind-the-scenes divisions among the Nato allies on how severe the response would be and as Germany faces criticism from Kyiv over its refusal to send defensive weapons to Ukraine.

Under efforts to deter Russian “aggression”, Biden said the leaders discussed preparations to “impose severe economic costs” against Moscow while seeking to “reinforce security on the eastern flank”.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said “it is up to Russia to undertake visible de-escalation,” while Nato secretary general Jens Stoltenberg warned of “severe costs” if there is “any further aggression” by Moscow against Ukraine.

Also on the call were the leaders of France, Italy, Poland and the European Union.

The French government has announced that Russian and Ukrainian officials would meet, along with French and German counterparts, in Paris on Wednesday to try to find a way out of the impasse.

Despite insisting he has no intention of attacking, president Vladimir Putin has deployed more than 100,000 troops close to Ukraine, where Russia already seized Crimea in 2014 and backs a separatist army in the east.

Moscow is demanding a guarantee that Ukraine, a former Soviet republic, never be allowed to join Nato, as well as other concessions by the United States in return for a decrease in tension.

The United States and Nato have rejected the Russian demands and told Putin to withdraw from Ukraine’s borders, warning that a Russian attack will trigger damaging economic sanctions, as well as a beefed-up Nato presence in eastern Europe.

On Monday the US placed 8,500 troops on heightened alert to deploy to Europe as Nato reinforced its eastern borders with warships and fighter jets, amid growing fears of a possible “lightning” attack by Russia to seize the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv.

Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby said the troops, all of them currently stationed in the US, would be on standby to take part in Nato’s Response Force (NRF) if it is activated, but would also be available “if other situations develop”.

The alert order issued by the defence secretary, Lloyd Austin, reduces the number of days it would take to deploy but it is not itself an order to deploy.

The USS Harry S Truman aircraft carrier, along with its strike group and air wing, joined patrolling activities across the Mediterranean Sea on Monday, the first time since the cold war that a full US carrier group has come under Nato command.

Kirby said: “In the event of Nato’s activation of the NRF or a deteriorating security environment, the United States would be in a position to rapidly deploy additional brigade combat teams, logistics, medical,

aviation, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, transportation and additional capabilities into Europe.”

Any deployment in Europe, he said, “is really about reassuring the eastern flank of Nato” of the US readiness to come to the defence of alliance members. The force would not be deployed in Ukraine, which is not a Nato member. There are currently about 150 US military advisers in the country, and Kirby said there were no plans at present to withdraw them.

Jen Psaki, the White House spokesperson, said the US had “a sacred obligation to support the security of our eastern flank countries”.

“We are talking to them about what their needs are and what security concerns they have. So I wouldn’t say it’s a response to an abrupt moment. It’s a part of an ongoing contingency planning process and discussion,” Psaki said.

Earlier on Monday, Jens Stoltenberg, Nato’s secretary general, said the “deteriorating security situation” had driven the military alliance to bolster its “collective defence”.

The Kremlin pointed to the new deployments as evidence of Nato aggressive posturing, blaming Nato for the rise in tensions. Its spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said: “We see statements by the North Atlantic Alliance about reinforcement, pulling forces and resources to the eastern flank. All this leads to the fact that tensions are growing. This is not happening because of what we, Russia, are doing. This is all happening because of what Nato and the US are doing and due to the information they are spreading.”

In recent months Russia has massed more than 100,000 troops along Ukraine’s border and it is planning extensive military exercises in neighbouring Belarus and in the Mediterranean.

The Belarusian leader, Alexander Lukashenko, said on Monday he would deploy a “whole contingent of the army” to the border with Ukraine, alleging: “Ukrainians have begun to gather troops [there]. I don’t understand why.”

Russia continued preparations for sweeping naval exercises on Monday as the Baltic fleet announced that two corvettes had set sail to join in the military drills. The Kremlin has also dispatched six amphibious landing ships to the Mediterranean as part of the exercises, which will include 140 ships and more than 10,000 Russian troops.

The tensions have helped fuel instability in global markets, while Russia’s main stock index plunged and the central bank suspended foreign currency purchasing after the ruble slumped.

Washington is trying to maintain transatlantic unity to build a credible threat of sanctions as a deterrence against Moscow.

However, members of the 27-nation European Union have starkly differing approaches and ties to Russia.

The new government in EU economic powerhouse Germany in particular has faced anger from Kyiv over its refusal to send weapons to Ukraine, as well as hesitating over one of the harshest economic sanctions under discussion – cutting Moscow from the global SWIFT payments system.

Echoing other US warnings, Kirby said on Monday that intelligence shows “it’s very clear that the Russians have no intention right now of de-escalating.” However, some European leaders are signalling less alarm.

EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said after talks with US top diplomat Antony Blinken that there was nothing to suggest an “immediate” Russian attack.

“You have to stay calm doing what you have to do, and avoid a nervous breakdown,” he said.

	<p>On Sunday and Monday the White House and Downing Street said they had started withdrawing diplomats' families from Ukraine.</p> <p>The Ukrainian government has criticised the withdrawals as “premature”. Ukrainian security experts said that Russia has not yet made the preparations necessary for a large-scale invasion, such as the deployment of combat units and establishment of medical facilities.</p> <p>Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of the national security and defence council, said he did not expect an imminent invasion and did not share the “panic” which he connected to “geopolitical and domestic” processes in the west.</p> <p>“The buildup of Russian troops isn’t as rapid as some claim,” Danilov told the BBC’s Ukrainian service.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Covid cases rising rapidly nursing homes
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/jan/24/covid-coronavirus-us-nursing-homes-hospital-
GIST	<p>Covid cases are rising rapidly among US nursing home residents and staff, causing shortages in admissions, exacerbating bed shortages at hospitals in turn, and in some cases requiring the national guard to be called in.</p> <p>The Omicron wave has sent many staff home sick at care facilities and rehabilitation centers that offer round-the-clock medical care. As a result, hospitals that would normally release patients into such stepped-down care are now holding off, creating a backlog of patients stuck in hospital.</p> <p>“Things are condition critical today. Individuals can’t find an empty or staffed bed out there,” said David Grabowski, professor of health care policy at Harvard Medical School.</p> <p>“It really puts hospitals in a difficult position,” he said, noting that they can’t admit new patients until they find a spot at a care facility for those patients well enough to be transferred. “That’s a huge problem, because they’re occupying a bed that would otherwise go to a new patient.”</p> <p>There were more than 31,500 cases among nursing home residents in the week ending 9 January, nearly as many as last winter’s peak, according to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.</p> <p>Cases among staff are even higher – more than double last year’s highest record, with more than 57,000 confirmed cases in the week of 9 January, a tenfold increase in just three weeks.</p> <p>The rapid rise in infections compounds existing worker shortages, with 234,000 caregivers having exited the industry during the pandemic so far – a 15% reduction in the workforce in only two years.</p> <p>In Wisconsin, the shortages are so acute that more than 200 members of the national guard will be trained to work as nursing aides.</p> <p>“Right now, the only thing that is on their minds is the essential of, ‘How do we stay open without shortchanging our patients?’” said Leemore Dafny, professor at Harvard Business School.</p> <p>Yet the acute care offered by some nursing homes is “a really important release valve for the hospitals”, she said, adding that without it hospitals may become even more overwhelmed: “It causes this ricochet effect.”</p> <p>Care facilities, already buffeted by the pandemic, are a little-acknowledged part of the health system, particularly for patients who don’t need hospital-level care but aren’t yet ready to go home.</p>

“Nursing homes, including the post-acute care parts, have just always been kind of secondary to hospitals, and I think that comes back to bite us. Because it turns out they’re a pretty essential link in the chain,” said R Tamara Konetzka, professor of public health sciences at the University of Chicago.

“Nursing homes throughout the early part of the pandemic were really the epicenter of the tragedy of Covid-19,” Konetzka said. At various times, they accounted for 30% to 50% of the total deaths in their areas.

Residents of nursing homes have had some of the highest fatality rates of the pandemic, because of their close living quarters and the increased susceptibility of residents to Covid-19.

The pandemic was also brutal on staff. “They put themselves at risk. Cases among staff have been among the highest” among workers, Grabowski said. At one point in the pandemic, he said, being a nursing home worker was the most dangerous job in America, based on the death rates.

Nursing homes had already struggled with understaffing for decades, and the pandemic amplified those problems. Workers feared getting sick and [bringing the virus home](#) to vulnerable family members. Some struggled to find child care during school and daycare closures. Others became disabled, and still others died. Some, meanwhile, found they could work elsewhere for equal or better pay.

Yet having enough staff during nursing-home outbreaks can be a defining factor in how well residents do, according to [research](#) from Konetzka, Grabowski, and others.

“You really need enough staff to try to stem the outbreak,” Konetzka said. Nursing home staff test patients regularly, move those who are positive into isolation areas, and provide care both for Covid and any underlying conditions.

Admissions to nursing homes remain below pre-pandemic levels. The pandemic has seen some patients defer care and hospitals delay scheduled procedures, such as hip replacements, that would require a stay in a step-down facility.

Many patients were worried by headlines about high rates of cases and deaths in nursing homes, as well as isolation and loneliness.

“There was a real reluctance to enter a nursing home during the pandemic,” Grabowski said.

Omicron has so far led to significantly lower deaths than previous Covid waves, though deaths can be a lagging indicator, following cases and hospitalizations by a few weeks. High vaccination rates among residents – 87% are fully immunized – may keep fatalities low.

“The original vaccine effort was one of the real success stories during the pandemic when it comes to nursing homes,” Grabowski said.

However, there is high turnover in care facilities, both of staff and residents. “Even if you got everybody vaccinated the first time around, a few months later, there are going to be different people there,” Konetzka said.

Residents of nursing homes are also at generally higher risk of breakthrough infections, in part because the vaccines don’t work as well to spark lasting immune systems of older adults. Boosters can help, Konetzka said, but “that’s also not been very organized or systematic.”

Staff vaccination rates are lower, too, at 81%. That means one in five nursing-home employees are unvaccinated, putting them at higher risk of passing the virus on to residents and getting ill themselves. Even if staff are out for a few days, it puts pressure on the entire system.

	But staff vaccination rates may soon increase with the federal vaccine mandate for facilities accepting Medicaid and Medicare, which could help reduce soaring cases and shortages.
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HEADLINE	01/24 Judge blocks NY mask mandate: unlawful
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#a-new-york-judge-rules-that-the-states-mask-mandate-is-unconstitutional-and-cant-be-enforced
GIST	<p>A New York State judge ruled on Monday that the state’s mask mandate was enacted unlawfully and is now void, according to court documents.</p> <p>In December 2021, amid a winter virus surge, Gov. Kathy Hochul renewed a mask mandate at all indoor public places throughout the state — including schools and nursing homes, and on public transit — to last a month. The state Health Department then extended the mandate an additional two weeks, to expire Feb. 1.</p> <p>In his decision, State Supreme Court Justice Thomas Rademacher wrote that Ms. Hochul and state health officials lacked the authority to enact the mask mandate without the approval of state lawmakers. Regardless of the “well aimed” intentions of state officials, this is “entrusted solely to the State Legislature,” Justice Rademacher wrote.</p> <p>The state attorney general’s office is planning to appeal the ruling. And Emily DeSantis, a spokeswoman for the state Education Department, said the state Health Department would appeal, which would automatically restore the mask rule until an appellate court issues a ruling.</p> <p>“Therefore, schools must continue to follow the mask rule,” she added.</p> <p>While the ruling overturns the statewide mandate for masks in schools and public places, it does not reverse local mandates.</p> <p>Ms. Hochul said in a statement on Monday that her office strongly disagreed with the ruling and would be “pursuing every option to reverse this immediately.”</p> <p>“My responsibility as Governor is to protect New Yorkers throughout this public health crisis, and these measures help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and save lives,” she said.</p> <p>The ruling was applauded by some Republicans, including Congresswoman Elise Stefanik of New York, who said in a statement on Monday that it was a “win for small businesses, parents, students, and the freedom of all New Yorkers.”</p> <p>“Governor Hochul’s authoritarian mandates were crushing New York small businesses that already have faced unprecedented challenges throughout the COVID-19 pandemic,” Ms. Stefanik said. “By forcing masks on the children in our schools, these mandates have impeded the development of our next generation.”</p> <p>In New York, the Omicron surge has been receding, but it is not over. An average of about 20,000 people are now testing positive daily for Covid-19, down sharply from this surge’s peak of 90,000 people who tested positive on Jan. 7. The rate of positivity has also fallen, by half, from over 22 percent to 10 percent.</p> <p>But New York’s daily cases remain far higher than they were at the start of the surge in early December, and hospitals are still straining to treat some 10,000 Covid patients statewide. Hospitalizations have begun declining but remain higher than at any point since May 2020. More than 130 people each day have been dying of the virus statewide.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Idaho rations care overwhelmed hospitals
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SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#idaho-reactivates-crisis-standards-to-ration-care-at-overwhelmed-hospitals
GIST	<p>Severe staffing and blood shortages in southern Idaho have prompted state officials to again activate “crisis standards of care” that allow hospitals to triage care, potentially resulting in longer wait times, unavailable equipment and harrowing decisions about which patients need treatment the most.</p> <p>The crisis standards apply to hospitals in most of the southern part of the state, according to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. The standards could be extended throughout Idaho, the state’s Health Department said.</p> <p>Health officials had previously announced crisis standards statewide in September 2021; they were lifted three months later.</p> <p>While the Omicron wave seems to be peaking nationally, cases remain dangerously high and are continuing to rise in parts of the South, Midwest and West, flooding hospitals whose staff have been depleted by the virus. Hospitalizations nationwide are averaging 157,000 each day over the past week, up 14 percent. Deaths are up 25 percent from two weeks ago to more than 2,000 a day.</p> <p>Colorado reactivated crisis standards earlier this month, advising patient transport in “only the most severe cases,” according to reporting by Colorado Public Radio. And there is a continuing medical oxygen shortage in California, where emergency workers in Los Angeles were urged this month to administer as little oxygen as possible.</p> <p>New cases in Idaho are still climbing steeply, up 174 percent over two weeks, a New York Times database. Hospitalizations are up 67 percent.</p> <p>Only 48 percent of Idaho’s population is fully vaccinated, the lowest rate in the country, according to a Times tracker.</p> <p>Dave Jeppesen, the director of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare, said in a statement on Monday that “the highly contagious Omicron variant has thrown us a curve ball.”</p> <p>“Once again, the situation in our hospitals and health systems is dire — we don’t have enough resources to adequately treat patients,” Mr. Jeppesen said.</p> <p>Two facilities in Idaho’s Saint Alphonsus Health System, the hospital network that requested the reactivation of crisis standards, are nearly out of I.C.U. beds.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 China lifts month-long lockdown over 13M
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#china-lifts-a-monthlong-lockdown-on-the-13-million-residents-of-the-city-of-xian
GIST	<p>The authorities in China have said that, starting on Monday, the 13 million residents in Xi’an will be allowed to travel in and out of the city, ending a 32-day lockdown that raised questions about the country’s harsh Covid controls and commitment to preventing any outbreak of the disease.</p> <p>Streets, supermarkets, and public areas once emptied by the restrictions were again crowded, according to posts on Chinese social media from residents. Local officials said that the city had been downgraded to a “low-risk area” and that normal work and production could be restored.</p> <p>Prompted by an outbreak of more than a thousand infections of the Delta variant last month, the lockdown in Xi’an was as severe as the country’s first, in the city of Wuhan, where the coronavirus was first observed two years ago. After an initial outbreak in early December, the shutdown was imposed on Dec. 23. In total, the city recorded 2,080 infections, but has not had any cases since Jan. 21, according to local officials.</p>

	<p>The harsh lockdown in Xi'an became a symbol of the extreme measures that China's government has taken to control Covid after testimonies emerged on Chinese social media of problems including people struggling to get enough food. In other cases, those in need of medical care were denied entry to hospitals because of stringent epidemic prevention measures. In one case, a pregnant woman was refused treatment because of an expired coronavirus test. She later lost her child.</p> <p>Public transport in Xi'an, as well as flights and trains to and from the city, resumed service over the past week. Those with a green health code in China's official Covid-19 tracking software can now leave the city without official approval.</p> <p>In other parts of China, cities remain in various states of lockdown as officials seek to beat back other outbreaks, including cases of the highly infectious Omicron variant. In Beijing, officials have struggled to control an outbreak of Omicron as the city enters the final preparations to host the Winter Olympics.</p> <p>Some Covid-19 counter measures for the Olympics were eased on Monday, according to a statement released by the International Olympic Committee. The committee said that changes had been made to lower the threshold for a test being classified as a positive coronavirus case. It also adjusted the period of time for someone to be considered a close contact of a Covid case to seven days, from 14.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Education setbacks 'nearly insurmountable'
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#omicron-covid-19-education-unicef
GIST	<p>Almost two years into the coronavirus pandemic, more than 635 million children globally remain affected by full or partial school closures, the United Nations said Monday in a report that called the setbacks to education "nearly insurmountable."</p> <p>The report from the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, said that many of these children had lost basic numeracy and literacy skills from the prolonged loss of classroom learning.</p> <p>In low- and middle-income countries, UNICEF said up to 70 percent of 10-year-olds could not read or comprehend a simple text, up from 53 percent before the coronavirus became a pandemic in March 2020.</p> <p>Notable data points in the report included Brazil, where 75 percent of second graders in some states are behind in reading, compared with 50 percent prepandemic; and South Africa, where schoolchildren are up to a full year behind where they should be.</p> <p>In the United States, the report said, states including California, Colorado, Maryland, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia have reported that two-thirds of their third graders scored below grade level in mathematics last year, compared with half in 2019.</p> <p>"Quite simply, we are looking at a nearly insurmountable scale of loss to children's schooling," Robert Jenkins, the chief of education at UNICEF, said in the report. "While the disruptions to learning must end, just reopening schools is not enough. Students need intensive support to recover lost education."</p> <p>Globally, the report said, "disruption to education has meant millions of children have significantly missed out on the academic learning they would have acquired if they had been in the classroom, with younger and more marginalized children facing the greatest loss."</p> <p>Despite efforts to mitigate the effects of school closures with remote learning, that solution is impractical or impossible where families lack internet access and home computers. And many students in low-income countries are not returning to class even when schools reopen.</p>

Earlier this month [in Uganda](#), where schools reopened for the first time since the pandemic began, educators estimated that up to one-third of students, who had taken jobs to help support their struggling families, might not return.

Education is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, benchmarks established by the United Nations to help measure basic improvements in people's lives. According to the U.N.'s Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which monitors each goal on its website, the coronavirus [has "wiped out 20 years of education gains."](#)

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HEADLINE	01/24 Baltimore firefighters killed in bldg. blaze
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/us/baltimore-firefighters-killed.html
GIST	<p>Three firefighters were killed on Monday and another was critically injured after part of a vacant Baltimore rowhouse collapsed, trapping them inside as they battled a blaze, the authorities said.</p> <p>The Baltimore Fire Department responded to a call just before 6 a.m. at a three-story home about two miles west of downtown Baltimore, Chief Niles Ford of the Baltimore City Fire Department said at a news conference on Monday afternoon.</p> <p>After the firefighters became trapped, crews had to remove piles of debris to extricate them, officials said. One was immediately pulled from the fire and taken to a hospital, where he remained in critical condition on Monday afternoon. Two firefighters were later removed from the fire and taken to a hospital, where they were pronounced dead, Chief Ford said. A third firefighter died at the scene.</p> <p>"From this moment, we will honor those who lost their lives today for their bravery, for their courage, for their love and compassion for this great city, and for the Fire Department as well," Chief Ford said.</p> <p>Mayor Brandon Scott of Baltimore said Monday evening that the hospitalized firefighter was in critical condition and "fighting for his life."</p> <p>"Baltimore has lost three of the bravest among us," Mr. Scott said. "This is a gut wrenching tragedy for our city, for our Fire Department, and most importantly, for the families of our firefighters. There are no words — none — to describe the pain and the severity of the losses that we suffered today."</p> <p>The three firefighters who died were Lt. Paul Butrim, who had been with the department for 16 years; Kelsey Sadler, a 15-year department veteran; and Kenny Lacayo, who had been with the department for seven years, city officials said.</p> <p>The hospitalized firefighter, John McMaster, who was on life support on Monday evening, has been with the department for six years, city officials said.</p> <p>James Sadler, Ms. Sadler's father-in-law, described Ms. Sadler as a "lovely woman" whom he loved like a daughter.</p> <p>"When she hugged you, she hugged you like a bear," he said in a phone interview on Monday night, adding that she had been married to his son for about four years.</p> <p>"I can't believe it," he said. "Words can't even explain how much I'm going to miss her."</p> <p>Dr. Thomas Scalea, physician in chief of the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center, said that the two firefighters who were pronounced dead at the hospital had gone into cardiac arrest at the scene, and that they were unable to be resuscitated.</p> <p>In a statement on Monday, Gov. Larry Hogan of Maryland ordered that flags across the state be lowered to half-staff to honor the firefighters.</p>

	<p>“Each and every day, our firefighters and first responders answer the call and are ready to run into danger,” Mr. Hogan said. “This is our worst nightmare.”</p> <p>Chief Ford said the cause of the fire was being investigated.</p> <p>Although the rowhouse was vacant, Mr. Scott said other buildings on the block were not.</p> <p>“We could be talking about more lives lost if not for the heroics of these folks here,” Mr. Scott said. “That should be the focus of today.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Military seizes power in Burkina Faso
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/world/africa/burkina-faso-military-coup.html
GIST	<p>OUAGADOUGOU, Burkina Faso — The military seized power in Burkina Faso on Monday, ousting the country’s democratically elected president after mutinous soldiers stormed his home, in the latest of a series of military coups in African countries struggling to beat back a rising tide of Islamist violence.</p> <p>President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, 64, had been leading Burkina Faso, a poor and landlocked country of 21 million people in Western Africa, since 2015. But he faced growing public criticism over his government’s failure to stem militant attacks that have destabilized broad swathes of Burkina Faso, displaced 1.4 million people, and caused 2,000 deaths last year alone.</p> <p>Although the violence by the militants is part of a broader campaign in the Sahel, a vast stretch of land just south of the Sahara, many soldiers and civilians in Burkina Faso faulted their president over his failure to stop it.</p> <p>A wave of public protests in recent months was accompanied by rising discontent inside the military, which moved against him on Sunday, occupying several military bases, and then ousted him on Monday.</p> <p>“We were just sick of him,” said Adjara Dera, a woman carrying a basket of bananas who joined a jubilant crowd celebrating the coup at the main square in the capital, Ouagadougou, on Monday evening. “Our friends have been dying, our policemen have been dying. It just wasn’t working. We’re sick of it.”</p> <p>It was the latest in a flurry of coups in sub-Saharan Africa, the greatest concentration in years, with takeovers in Mali, Burkina Faso’s neighbor to the north, as well as Guinea, Sudan, and Chad. But whether the latest ouster of democracy will prove the salve to the militant-driven misery so desperately sought by many in Burkina Faso remains to be seen.</p> <p>The coup was announced on state television late Monday afternoon by a fresh-faced officer who interrupted a program about the fish trade to announce that the military had suspended the Constitution and dissolved the government, and that it was closing Burkina Faso’s land and air borders until further notice.</p> <p>In the familiar language of military coups, the spokesman said the armed forces were acting out of a sense of duty, reacting to “the exasperation of the people.” Beside him sat a man in fatigues he introduced as Burkina Faso’s new leader: Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, the commander of one of the country’s three military regions.</p> <p>The spokesman gave no indication of President Kaboré’s whereabouts, or whether he had agreed to step down, saying only he had been captured “without bloodshed” alongside other civilian leaders, and was being kept “in a secure place.”</p> <p>In fact, there were many signs that the ousted president, who came to power in 2015 and was re-elected in 2020, did not go easily.</p>

Mr. Kaboré's troubles started on Sunday when soldiers seized several military bases in the capital and at least two towns in the provinces. Riot police officers clashed with civilian protesters who supported the military in Ouagadougou, firing tear gas to prevent them reaching a central plaza.

But the soldiers kept control of the bases and, after demanding sweeping reforms to the campaign against the Islamist militants — including the removal of Burkina Faso's military chief — they moved against the president himself.

Sporadic bursts of gunfire near Mr. Kaboré's home in the capital's most upmarket neighborhood that started late on Sunday continued for hours, suggesting that the military was split between rival factions that supported the president or sought to topple him.

After daybreak, several armored vehicles from the presidential convoy were found abandoned near the house, some of them covered in bullet holes. Then came reports that some soldiers had taken the president into custody, pressuring him to resign.

There were signs that Mr. Kaboré was resisting the military's orders, and at one point was protected by a unit of paramilitary gendarmes who were negotiating on his behalf with the mutinying soldiers, said a senior Western official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive events. In the afternoon Mr. Kaboré's Twitter account published a message in which he urged people to stand fast behind their tottering democracy.

"Our country is going through a difficult time," the tweet read, urging the rebellious soldiers to "lay down their arms."

But a few hours later the men in fatigues appeared on television, and announced they were now in charge.

Mr. Kaboré never had a strong interest in military matters, and his fate was sealed by a growing public perception that he was incapable of defeating the Islamist militant threat, said Rinaldo Depagne, an expert on Burkina Faso at the International Crisis Group.

"He's not absolutely awful and corrupt," he said. "But it's obvious that people think, rightly or wrongly, that a man in uniform with a big gun is better able to protect them than a democratically elected president."

The United States has poured millions of dollars into training and equipping the military in Burkina Faso to fight insurgents — in 2016 supplying what amounted to about two-thirds of Burkina Faso's defense budget — with few results to show for it.

The new leader, Colonel Damiba, is not well known to most in Burkina Faso.

Trained at the Military School of Paris, he was previously a member of the elite force that guarded President Blaise Compaoré, who ruled for 27 years until his ouster in 2014. After that unit was disbanded, he was integrated into the regular army, where he began to rise through the ranks. Last year, he published a book titled "West African Armies and Terrorism: Uncertain Responses?"

Two months ago, Colonel Damiba was named to command one of Burkina Faso's three military regions — a promotion that coincided with growing disgruntlement inside the ranks. In November, a regional U.N. envoy warned of a possible coup in Burkina Faso, and last week the authorities arrested another officer accused of planning a takeover.

On Monday, even before the coup was formally announced, some residents of the capital welcomed it as a foregone conclusion.

Fleets of young men on motorbikes whizzed past the headquarters of the state broadcasting service, where mutinying soldiers stood guard at the gate, honking their horns and cheering. At a nearby cellphone market, Kudougou Damiba theatrically threw himself to his knees to show his support for the incipient coup.

“We are saved!” he declared. “Roch is gone, finally”

Mr. Damiba, no relation to the coup leader, described the president as the author of his own misfortune. “Instead of uniting people, Roch divided them,” he said. “And that allowed the jihadists to attack us. It’s his fault.”

Others at the outdoor market shared that view, expressing in vivid terms their frustration over the Islamist violence that has divided a country once known for coexistence between Christians and Muslims.

“For a large part of the people, life became impossible,” said Mr. Depagne, the analyst. “They want someone to blame.”

Part of that blame was assigned to France, the former colonial power, which has deployed thousands of troops to the Sahel region in an effort to counter the Islamist surge, including in Burkina Faso.

On Monday many protesters vented angrily about France, with some even accusing it of secretly supporting the Islamist militants in an effort to extend its influence. “We say no to imperialism,” said Mohammed Niampa, one of the coup celebrants. “This is the start of our total independence.”

But others took a more skeptical view of Burkina Faso’s latest lurch away from democracy.

Anatole Compaoré, an unemployed 31-year-old, participated in the recent wave of street protests calling for Mr. Kaboré’s resignation. Even so, he didn’t think that a new dose of military rule was the solution to the problem.

After Blaise Compaore, Burkina Faso’s leader of 27 years, was overthrown in 2014, the military “said that everything would change,” he noted. “But nothing changed. And I’m not sure it will be any different this time.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 WHO: hope for ‘stabilization, normalization’
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#who-expresses-hope-that-omicrons-spread-could-lead-to-stabilization-and-normalization
GIST	<p>The pandemic that has convulsed the world for more than two years is entering a “new phase” globally, and the rapid spread of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus offers “plausible hope” for a return to normalcy in the months ahead, the World Health Organization’s top official in Europe said in a statement released Monday.</p> <p>Dr. Hans Kluge, the director for the W.H.O.’s European region, warned that it was too early for nations to drop their guard, but he said that between vaccination and natural immunity through infection, “Omicron offers plausible hope for stabilization and normalization.”</p> <p>His comments echoed the optimism of other leading public health officials around the world, including Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, President Biden’s top medical adviser for the coronavirus.</p> <p>Dr. Fauci said on Sunday that while there would be pain in the weeks ahead, especially as Omicron moves through the unvaccinated, the hope was that the continued spread of Omicron would not disrupt society to the same degree as other variants of the coronavirus have done over the past two years.</p>

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the head of the W.H.O., said that it remained the collective responsibility of the world to end the pandemic.

“There are different scenarios for how the pandemic could play out and how the acute phase could end. But it’s dangerous to assume that Omicron will be the last variant or that we are in the endgame,” he said on Monday at an executive board meeting of the global health organization “On the contrary, globally, the conditions are ideal for more variants to emerge.”

Given how the virus has offered new surprises and challenges throughout the pandemic, Dr. Kluge also offered a mix of caution and optimism.

“The pandemic is far from over, but I am hopeful we can end the emergency phase in 2022 and address other health threats that urgently require our attention,” Dr. Kluge wrote. “Backlogs and waiting lists have grown, essential health services have been disrupted, and plans and preparations for climate-related health stresses and shocks have been put on hold.”

The W.H.O.’s European region encompasses more than just the European Union. It includes 53 countries, covering a vast geographical region from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Omicron has been spreading across the area from the west to the east, into countries where vaccination rates are lower.

“While Omicron appears to cause much less severe disease than Delta, we are still seeing a rapid rise in hospitalizations, due to the sheer number of infections,” Dr. Kluge wrote. “Fortunately, hospitalizations with Omicron result much less frequently in I.C.U. admission. As predicted, most people needing intensive care across the region are unvaccinated.”

He urged nations to step up vaccination drives.

“Too many people who need the vaccine remain unvaccinated,” he said. “This is helping to drive transmission, prolonging the pandemic and increasing the likelihood of new variants.”

Two years ago today — Jan. 24, 2020 — the first case of coronavirus in Europe was [detected in France](#). Dr. Kluge took note of [the toll the virus had wrought](#) in the 732 days that have followed.

Some 1.7 million deaths in the region have been attributed to Covid — which amounts to 99 people dying every hour of every day, [according to the W.H.O.’s estimates](#).

In addition, more than four million people have been pushed into poverty in the region — meaning they earn less than \$5.50 a day. Frontline health workers have experienced significant levels of anxiety, and the W.H.O. cited one study showing that about 40 percent of the staff working in intensive care units met the clinical threshold for post-traumatic stress disorder.

“This pandemic, like all other pandemics before it, will end, but it is far too early to relax,” Dr. Kluge said. He added that it was “almost a given that new Covid-19 variants will emerge and return.”

But the world was in a much better place to deal with what might come, he noted.

“I believe that a new wave could no longer require the return to pandemic-era population-wide lockdowns or similar measures,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/24 Omicron peaking but ‘more pain’ to come
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#fauci-suggests-omicron-wave-is-peaking-but-warns-of-more-pain-to-come

GIST

The crushing [wave of Omicron variant cases may show signs of receding](#) in the United States, but Dr. Anthony S. Fauci has warned that the surge has not yet peaked in some parts of the country and that Americans should not let their guard down.

The highly contagious Omicron does seem to have peaked in the Northeast, parts of the Upper Midwest and other areas where it first arrived, offering a bit of relief to virus-weary Americans. Nationally, new cases and hospital admissions have leveled off in recent days.

“What we would hope,” Dr. Fauci, President Biden’s top medical adviser for the coronavirus, said during an appearance on ABC’s “This Week,” “is that, as we get into the next weeks to month or so, we’ll see throughout the entire country the level of infection get to below what I call that area of control.”

That does not mean eradicating the virus, Dr. Fauci said. Infections will continue. “They’re there, but they don’t disrupt society,” he said. “That’s the best-case scenario.”

For now, the United States remains in a precarious position, averaging 690,000 daily cases, still far higher than at any other point in the pandemic. Hospitals are overstretched and deaths have risen to about 2,100 a day. Parts of the West, South and Great Plains are still seeing sharp increases.

“There may be a bit more pain and suffering with hospitalizations in those areas of the country that have not been fully vaccinated or have not gotten boosted,” Dr. Fauci said. [Hospitals are struggling](#) to keep up after multiple surges and staffing shortages, including in Mississippi, where nearly all of the state’s acute-care hospitals have been [pushed to capacity](#). The National Guard and active-duty U.S. military medics have been deployed to hospitals in several states.

States that are lagging in vaccinations, including [Utah](#), are reporting record levels of cases and hospitalizations.

But Omicron also has yet to peak in some Western states with higher vaccination rates.

[Oregon](#) is reporting a 71 percent increase in daily average cases over a two-week period and a 65 percent increase in hospitalizations, according to The Times’s database. This month, [Gov. Kate Brown said](#) she would be deploying up to 500 National Guard members to help strained hospitals with the soaring caseload.

[California](#) reported a 47 percent increase in daily average cases over the past two weeks, and a 61 percent increase in hospitalizations. Masks continue to be mandated indoors by state officials, and Gov. Gavin Newsom has also called on the National Guard in his state.

Scientists say it remains an open question whether Omicron signified the transition of the coronavirus from a pandemic to a less-threatening endemic virus, or whether future surges or variants would introduce a new round of tumult.

Dr. Fauci advised that remaining ready for the possibility of what he called “the worst-case scenario” would be wise. “I’m not saying it’s going to happen, but we have to be prepared,” he said, describing that situation as, “We get yet again another variant that has characteristics that would be problematic, like a high degree of transmissibility or a high degree of virulence.”

But overall, he said, “Things are looking good. We don’t want to get overconfident, but they look like they’re going in the right direction right now.”

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HEADLINE 01/24 SKorea: avoid travel for new year holiday

SOURCE <https://www.nytimes.com/live/2022/01/24/world/omicron-covid-vaccine-tests#south-korea-urges-people-to-avoid-travel-for-the-lunar-new-year-holiday>

GIST	<p>Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum of South Korea urged the public on Monday to avoid traveling during the coming Lunar New Year holiday, which takes place from Jan. 31 through Feb. 2, because of rising cases of the coronavirus.</p> <p>“It’s been two years since we haven’t been able to celebrate a proper Lunar New Year,” Mr. Kim said in a statement. “We ask that once again, you all celebrate the holidays at heart while social distancing.”</p> <p>On Monday, South Korea reported 7,513 new daily cases, almost double the figure for the same day last week. Omicron is now the dominant coronavirus variant in the country.</p> <p>The country tightened its social-distancing rules a few weeks ago, and the new regulations will last through the holiday weekend, meaning that businesses will have to close at 9 p.m.</p> <p>Restrictions on social gatherings however, have been raised from four to six people. According to the Our World in Data project at Oxford University, South Korea has a vaccination rate of 85 percent. People must prove that they are fully vaccinated status before they are allowed to enter businesses or public buildings.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Economy slows sharply in omicron wave
SOURCE	https://www.marketwatch.com/story/u-s-economy-hits-the-brakes-in-january-during-omicron-wave-markit-surveys-show-11643035960
GIST	<p>The numbers: The U.S. economy dropped down to a slower gear in January amid a record outbreak of coronavirus cases that intensified labor and supply shortages, according to pair of IHS Markit surveys of senior business executives.</p> <p>A “flash” index of service-oriented companies tumbled to an 18-month low of 50.9 from 57.6 in the final month of 2021, IHS Markit said. A similar gauge of manufacturers dropped to 55 from 57.7 in December — a 15-month low.</p> <p>The flash IHS surveys give the first clear indication of the damage done to the U.S. economy in the first month of the new year.</p> <p>Any reading above 50 means businesses are growing and numbers above 55% are quite healthy. Yet conditions aren’t as good as they were last fall, no thanks to the latest strain of the coronavirus.</p> <p>“Labor shortages, employee absences and the omicron wave reportedly weighed on growth,” IHS Markit said.</p> <p>Big picture: Omicron clearly dented the economy in January. Millions of people missed time from work and the virus disrupted already strained supply chains. Restaurants and other businesses that “serve” customers directly were the hardest hit.</p> <p>Yet with cases peaking, most business leaders believe growth will re-accelerate in the near future. Their biggest problem is an ongoing lack of supplies and labor.</p> <p>Key details: The increase in prices, a sign of inflation, was the slowest since last spring. The IHS report suggested that supply bottlenecks are still high but slowly easing.</p> <p>New orders, a sign of future sales, also remained strong. Employment was mixed.</p> <p>Despite ongoing difficulties, most executives remained optimistic that the economy would improve later in the year. They expect omicron to fade like other coronavirus waves and anticipate congestion in supply lines to slowly clear up.</p>

Executives are still worried about labor shortages, however, and rising wages associated with the dearth of people willing to accept jobs.

Looking ahead: “Despite the survey signaling a disappointing start to the year, there are some encouraging signals for the near-term outlook,” said Chris Williamson, chief business economist at IHS Markit.

Market reaction: The Dow Jones Industrial Average [DJIA, -2.46%](#) and S&P 500 [SPX, -2.88%](#) sank again in Monday trades. Stocks have tumbled this year in anticipation of the Federal Reserve raising interest rates. Tensions between the U.S. and Russia over Ukraine are adding to the angst.

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HEADLINE	01/24 Pharmacies, health centers free N95 masks
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/24/health/free-n95-masks-pharmacies-health-centers-us/index.html
GIST	<p>(CNN)The first free N95 masks have started to arrive at US pharmacies, with more on the way in the coming days, as the Biden administration seeks to ramp up access to high-quality masks amid the spread of the highly-transmissible Omicron variant.</p> <p>Masks already are set up for distribution at some Hy-Vee and Meijer grocery stores in the Midwest, with more expected at Southeastern Grocers stores later this week.</p> <p>"Last week masks began shipping and arriving at pharmacies and grocers around (the) country. We expect that throughout the week the number of stores and N95s arriving to scale up significantly," an administration official told CNN on Monday.</p> <p>The Biden administration announced last week that the 400 million N95 masks, which are coming from the Strategic National Stockpile, will be distributed to pharmacies and community health centers, with the program expected to be fully up and running by early February. The masks are arriving at their destinations with accompanying flyers and signage from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which paid for the masks.</p> <p>"Mask up and maximize your protection," the flyers say, encouraging Americans to "help slow the spread of Covid by protecting yourself and those around you."</p> <p>The flyer, which is being distributed in both English and Spanish, notes that up to three of the free masks are "available to every person in the U.S." It directs people to cdc.gov/coronavirus and includes a QR code with instructions on how to properly put on and take off the masks.</p> <p>Where masks are arriving</p> <p>Some of the first masks arrived in the Midwest on Friday, including at Hy-Vee grocery stores in Iowa, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Kansas, South Dakota, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Meijer stores in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky and Wisconsin.</p> <p>Masks will also begin arriving at Southeastern Grocers locations as early this Friday, the official added, and will be available at Fresco y Más, Harveys Supermarket and Winn-Dixie in-store pharmacies.</p> <p>Mills Civic Hy-Vee in West Des Moines, Iowa, received masks Friday, along with nearly 150 other Hy-Vee locations. Photos provided by the store show employees handing out the individually wrapped packages of masks, with flyers positioned nearby for customers to take home.</p> <p>"I can confirm that we began receiving and distributing our first shipments of N95 masks from HHS on Friday, Jan. 21. At this time, many Hy-Vee pharmacy locations have received and are distributing their mask allocations. All 275 Hy-Vee pharmacies in Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wisconsin will have masks by mid-week," Christina Gayman, a spokesperson for Hy-Vee, Inc., wrote in an email to CNN on Monday.</p>

"We have received many positive comments from customers who are happy we have the masks and are distributing them so quickly. We still have masks available at all locations that have received them so far," Gayman added.

At Meijer locations, the masks will be placed on tables near the store entrances and distributed by greeters. Meijer confirmed to CNN on Monday that it has received "an estimated 3 million masks" that will be made available for no charge to any customer who needs them.

CVS pharmacies are also expected to receive and begin distributing free N95 masks in the coming weeks as supply from the federal government comes in, spokesman Matt Blanchette told CNN in an email Monday.

Walgreens expects free N95 masks will be available at some locations starting this Friday, according to a company spokesperson.

"We are pleased to partner with the Administration to make N95 masks in varying sizes available free of charge at participating Walgreens locations while supplies last," a Walgreens spokesperson wrote in an email to CNN on Monday.

"Customers and patients can pick up a maximum of three masks per person," the email noted. "We expect the first stores to begin offering masks on Friday, Jan. 28, and will continue on a rolling basis in the days and weeks following. Participating stores will have signage indicating mask availability."

The first 100 community health centers participating in the rollout of the federal government's free N95 mask program will also start this week, Amy Simmons Farber, a spokesperson for the National Association of Community Health Centers wrote in an email to CNN on Monday. The Health Resources and Services Administration or HRSA oversees the Community Health Centers program for the federal government, and notes on its website that the HRSA Health Center COVID-19 N95 Mask Program will begin incrementally, providing N95 masks to approximately 100 to 200 health centers in the initial phase.

"These health centers should receive and start distributing masks before the end of January 2022," according to HRSA. Farber added that by mid-February, HRSA anticipates that masks will be made available to all health centers.

"For now, the program is limited to around 300 Community Health Centers to ensure the logistics of receiving, storing and distributing the masks are worked out. Our understanding is the program will be widened to include more health centers as part of the Biden Administration's effort to ensure underserved communities have equitable access to public health tools," Farber wrote in the email.

"Our understanding is that these select health centers should be receiving the masks by the end of January," Farber wrote. "Each individual health center will need time to develop a distribution plan and notification process for patients. If you are a patient, check with your local health center's web site for announcements. Bear in mind that most health care systems are at capacity and workers are suffering from pandemic exhaustion -- and health centers are no exception. Try to avoid overwhelming call centers for now."

Masks are 'largest deployment' yet

This rollout of free masks has been called the federal government's "largest deployment" yet.

"This effort represents the largest deployment by the Strategic National Stockpile to date and it's also the largest deployment of personal protective equipment in U.S. history," Dawn O'Connell, assistant secretary for Preparedness and Response at HHS wrote in a blog post Friday.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not plan to change its guidance on mask usage as the administration ramps up access to these masks.

	<p>The CDC recommends Americans wear well-fitting masks, which can include multiple layers of cloth masks, N95s, or K95s.</p> <p>"Masking is a critical public health tool to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and it is important to remember that any mask is better than no mask," the CDC said in a statement earlier this month.</p> <p>"Some masks and respirators offer higher levels of protection than others, and some may be harder to tolerate or wear consistently than others," CDC guidelines say. "It is most important to wear a well-fitted mask or respirator correctly that is comfortable for you and that provides good protection."</p> <p>By having a better fit and certain materials -- such as polypropylene fibers -- acting as both mechanical and electrostatic barriers, N95 masks help to better prevent tiny particles from getting into the nose or mouth and must be fitted to the face to function properly.</p> <p>"CDC continues to recommend that any mask is better than no mask. And we do encourage all Americans to wear a well-fitting mask to protect themselves and prevent the spread of Covid-19," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky told reporters in a briefing earlier this month. "And that recommendation is not going to change."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Russia invasion Ukraine looms; offramps?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/us/politics/us-russia-ukraine-war.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Russian troops are encircling Ukraine from three sides. In Washington and Brussels, there are warnings of crushing sanctions if Vladimir V. Putin orders an invasion. Embassy families — both American and Russian — are being evacuated from Kyiv.</p> <p>Yet there are still diplomatic options — “offramps” in the lingo of the negotiators — and in the next several days the Biden administration and NATO are expected to respond, in writing, to Mr. Putin’s far-reaching demands.</p> <p>The question is whether there is real potential for compromise in three distinct areas: Russia’s demand for ironclad assurances that Ukraine won’t enter NATO; that NATO won’t further expand; and that Russia can somehow restore some approximation of its sphere of influence in the region to before the strategic map of Europe was redrawn in the mid-1990s.</p> <p>The hardest issue of all defies negotiation: Mr. Putin’s demand that Ukraine reverse its “drift” toward the West. That is a matter of national sentiment, and polls show that in the years since Russia’s seizure of Crimea in 2014, Ukrainians are more desirous than ever of joining the Western alliance. Mr. Putin’s massing of the troops is likely to accelerate that trend, American officials say, rather than reverse it.</p> <p>And as in all conflicts with roots in the Cold War and its aftermath, the subtext of any negotiation includes how the world’s two largest nuclear-armed states manage their arsenals — and use them for leverage.</p> <p>While there is still time to avoid the worst, even President Biden’s top aides say they have no idea if a diplomatic solution, rather than the conquest of Ukraine, is what Mr. Putin has in mind. The Russian president views Ukraine not as a separate nation but as a land that was negotiated away after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many who have dealt with Mr. Putin believe he now sees it as his mission to correct that error, even if that means risking war to redraw the map of Europe.</p> <p>Even if the diplomacy is for real, no one is certain how long they have to head off military action. A few weeks? Until the end of the Beijing Winter Olympics, on the theory that Mr. Putin would not want to anger President Xi Jinping by starting a war that would divert attention from China’s big moment?</p> <p>Not all the potential blockades to a solution involve the Russians. If facing down Moscow was once a bipartisan task in Washington, it is no longer. Even before the counterproposals to Russia are finished,</p>

Republicans have been using the tensions to portray the administration as offering “appeasement,” a word chosen to evoke images of Britain’s approach to Nazi Germany in the 1930s.

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, trying to blunt the angle of attack, shot back on Sunday that “engaging in diplomacy doesn’t take the word ‘nyet’ out of your vocabulary.”

Defusing Ukraine

It is possible that Mr. Putin’s bottom line in this conflict is straightforward: that he wants to stop Ukraine from joining NATO and get an assurance that the United States and NATO will never place offensive weapons that threaten Russia’s security in Ukrainian territory.

On those two issues, it would seem, there is trading space. While the United States says it will never abandon the NATO “open door” policy — which means that every nation is free to make its own choice about whether it seeks to join the Western alliance — the reality is clear: Ukraine is so corrupt, and its grasp of democracy is so tenuous, that no one expects it to be accepted for NATO membership in the next decade or two.

On this, Mr. Biden has been clear.

“The likelihood that Ukraine is going to join NATO in the near term is not very likely,” he said at a news conference on Wednesday, giving voice to a previously unspoken truth. “So there is room to work if he wants to do that.”

It seemed an open invitation to offer Russia some kind of assurance that, for a decade, or maybe a quarter-century, NATO membership for Kyiv was off the table. But the Biden administration has drawn a red line at allowing Mr. Putin a right to veto which nations can join NATO.

More complex is negotiating the reverse problem: How the United States and NATO operate in Ukraine. Ever since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the United States and NATO nations have been haltingly providing Ukraine with what the West calls defensive arms, including the capability to take out Russian tanks and aircraft. That flow has sped up in recent weeks.

To hear Mr. Putin, those weapons are more offensive than defensive — and Russian disinformation campaigns have suggested that Washington’s real goal is to put nuclear weapons in Ukraine. Administration officials say the United States has no such plans — and some kind of agreement should be, as one official said, “the easiest part of this,” as long as Russia is willing to pull back its intermediate-range weapons as well.

Upending the European Order

Mr. Putin has made clear that he wants to restore what he calls Russia’s “sphere of influence” in the region — essentially a return to the Cold War order, before Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin agreed in 1997 that former Soviet states and Warsaw bloc nations could choose whether to seek membership in NATO. Since then, the alliance has roughly doubled in size.

Mr. Putin also wants all nuclear weapons out of Europe, even though those weapons — mostly gravity bombs that have been stored in Germany, Turkey, Italy and Belgium — have been there for decades. Asked on Wednesday whether he would take those weapons out or stop troop rotations through the former Soviet bloc, Mr. Biden said, “No, there’s not space for that.”

Rose Gottemoeller, who negotiated New START, the last major nuclear accord with Russia, said at the Center for the National Interest on Monday that Mr. Putin’s demands were partly “a temper-tantrum effect” after years in which his grievances have, in his view, never been taken seriously.

So is there room for negotiation? Perhaps there is, Ms. Gottemoeller said. She noted that Mr. Putin “cares about summitry with Biden,” which suggests that the two men might, ultimately, come to some kind of broader understanding about Europe’s future. At a minimum they could address the nuclear issues by

reviving the Intermediate Nuclear Forces agreement, which Mr. Putin violated for years and President Donald J. Trump scrapped.

And the United States has suggested reviving an old agreement that would limit military exercises, prescribe how far away from borders they needed to be and reduce the fear that an “exercise” turns into an invasion.

The problem with this approach is that it sounds a lot like continuing the kind of grinding, incremental arrangements that have marked the post-Cold War era. And that is exactly the era Mr. Putin is trying to blow up.

Cuban Missile Crisis Redux?

If all these sound like quarter-century-old problems, well, they are. Which is why any new accords with Russia, to be truly effective, would have to embrace Russia’s turn toward deniable, hard-to-detect cyberweapons. As the Department of Homeland Security reminded private industry over the weekend, American critical infrastructure, including the power grid, is laced with Russian-planted malware. So far, none has been triggered — and as a deterrent the United States [has planted code in the Russian grid as well](#).

Such weapons do not lend themselves to arms control — they are hard to find and impossible to count. But no agreement with Russia that excludes them will address the constant, asymmetric battling that goes on between the two countries every day.

And then there is the problem that dominated the Cold War: nukes.

In the past week, Mr. Putin has been on the phone — not just to his old allies, but to the leaders of Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba. Some Russian news organizations have said the topics might be what Mr. Putin likes to call a “military-technical” response to the Ukraine crisis.

There have been hints from Russian officials about what that means: Russia could consider placing nuclear weapons back in the Western Hemisphere, within easy, short reach of American cities. If that sounds familiar, it should. It was the core of the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the closest the world came to annihilation during the Cold War.

Mr. Putin’s motivation is clear: If the United States won’t remove its weapons from Europe — even aging tactical weapons that need to be dropped from airplanes — he is determined to put American cities at similar risk. So far, there is no evidence that he is doing anything but talking. But even the suggestion of it has revived old fears.

“The last thing in the world President Biden would want is to engage us and Russia in a nuclear exchange,” said Thomas Pickering, a veteran of Cold War diplomacy who is considered the dean of retired American diplomats.

The fear, now as then, is escalation. “Many people have postulated how that might happen,” Mr. Pickering said. “Almost no one that I know has given a conclusive way to stop it once it starts.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 Pentagon readies 8,500 troops ‘high alert’
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/us/politics/russia-ukraine-us-troops.html
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III has put 8,500 American troops on “high alert” for possible deployment to Eastern Europe, as NATO and the United States braced for a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Pentagon announced on Monday.</p> <p>Most of the 8,500 troops would take part in a NATO response force that might soon be activated, said John F. Kirby, the Pentagon spokesman. The remaining personnel would be part of a specific U.S.</p>

response to the deepening crisis, Defense Department officials said, most likely to provide assurance to American allies in Eastern Europe who are fearful that Russia's plans for Ukraine could extend to the Baltics and other countries in NATO's so-called eastern flank.

"It's very clear the Russians have no intention right now of de-escalating," Mr. Kirby said at a news conference on Monday. "What this is about, though, is reassurance to our NATO allies."

Mr. Kirby's announcement comes after [The New York Times reported](#) on Sunday that President Biden was considering the deployment of several thousand U.S. troops, as well as warships and aircraft, to NATO allies in the Baltics and Eastern Europe.

The moves signal a major pivot for the Biden administration, which until recently was taking a restrained stance on Ukraine, out of fear of provoking Russia. But as President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia has ramped up his threatening actions toward Ukraine, and talks between American and Russian officials have failed to discourage him, the Biden administration is moving away from its previous strategy.

At the same time, the administration continues to insist that the United States has no intention of going to war with Russia over the issue. Since Ukraine is not in NATO, the alliance is not bound by its treaty to come to Ukraine's defense. Russia's massing of more than 100,000 troops on Ukraine's border, and NATO's response, has nonetheless raised the specter of a war that could escalate and widen.

"I don't think anybody wants to see another war on the European continent," Mr. Kirby said.

In a meeting on Saturday at Camp David, the presidential retreat in Maryland, senior Pentagon officials presented Mr. Biden with several options that would lead to a shift in U.S. military assets much closer to Russia's doorstep, administration officials said.

The bulk of the troops being put on higher alert are active-duty ground troops, including combat brigades, and medical, aviation, transportation, intelligence and surveillance forces with their equipment, Mr. Kirby told reporters. He declined to identify the specific units, saying that families were being notified on Monday.

"High alert" means the troops are now on what Defense Department officials characterized as a tighter leash, in case deployment orders come quickly. In some cases, officials said, units that have been prepared to deploy within 10 days must now be prepared to deploy within five days.

While the United States could send some of these troops directly to Eastern European members of NATO, such as Poland or Romania, that request certain kinds of supporting forces, Mr. Kirby said most of the troops put on higher alert, if activated, would go toward a special NATO unit.

That unit, the NATO Response Force, or N.R.F., is a 40,000-member multinational force made up of land, air, maritime and Special Operations Forces troops that is intended to respond quickly to emergencies.

"This is significant because it signals that the U.S. is not just doing this unilaterally but is preparing to provide its forces to the N.R.F., all within a NATO context," said Frederick B. Hodges, the former top U.S. Army commander in Europe now with the Center for European Policy Analysis.

In 2014, after Russia seized Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine, the alliance designated about half of this unit, or about 20,000 troops, to be on "very high readiness" for the most urgent missions.

The NATO Response Force reports to Gen. Tod D. Wolters, a four-star U.S. Air Force officer who is the alliance's top military commander.

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SOURCE	https://www.nbcnews.com/investigations/fbi-searches-headquarters-national-covid-testing-company-rcna13319
GIST	<p>Federal agents executed a search warrant at the Chicago-area headquarters of a national pop-up testing chain called the Center for COVID Control, a spokesperson for the Health and Human Services inspector general said Monday.</p> <p>The FBI assisted in the search of the facility in Rolling Meadows, Illinois, said the spokesperson, Yvonne Gamble. An FBI spokesperson confirmed that the agency conducted “court-authorized law enforcement activity in Rolling Meadows” on Saturday.</p> <p>The Center for COVID Control has the same registered address as a laboratory called Doctors Clinical Laboratory, which conducted hundreds of thousands of PCR tests using specimens collected by the pop-up testing company, a company spokesperson said.</p> <p>Both the pop-up testing company and the lab have been under investigation by the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, as well as multiple state attorneys general.</p> <p>The company has billed the federal government more than \$120 million for testing uninsured people, according to federal records. A spokesperson for the Center for COVID Control did not respond to a request for comment about the search, which was first reported by USA Today. Emails and phone messages left at Doctors Clinical Laboratory were not returned.</p> <p>In multiple public documents, the two companies have listed the same address at 1685 Winnetka Cir, Rolling Meadows, IL 60008. The Center for COVID Control’s spokesperson has previously said that the companies are separate entities and that there is “no cross-ownership.”</p> <p>A spokesperson for the Illinois attorney general confirmed that the office is working with federal law enforcement agencies.</p> <p>“We are working with the FBI and other law enforcement partners and will not comment on ongoing investigations as we work to hold accountable individuals who engage in unlawful conduct,” the spokesperson said.</p> <p>In light of growing complaints, the Center for COVID Control paused its business activities Jan. 13. It was scheduled to reopen some sites around the country on Saturday, the day of the search.</p> <p>The Center for COVID Control’s CEO, Aleya Siyaj, 29, and her husband, Ali Syed, could not be immediately reached for comment.</p> <p>Siyaj and Syed’s previous businesses included a donut shop and an ax throwing business.</p> <p>The investigations were launched after the company drew dozens of consumer complaints from late test results to concerns that no tests were being conducted at all.</p> <p>Ryan Jacobson, a lawyer with the firm Smith Amundsen, which the Center for COVID Control hired to review its business practices, said in a statement last week about the investigations, “We are working closely with authorities to provide information and shed light on the operational challenges [Center for COVID Control] experienced at the height of the Omicron surge, which no doubt contributed to consumer complaints and public scrutiny.”</p> <p>The pop-up testing company grew quickly last fall and swiftly expanded to 300 sites nationwide.</p> <p>The lab and the Center for COVID Control have been under investigation by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services since late November, when an inspection revealed widespread violations, including a failure to label specimens.</p>

	The Illinois, Colorado, Minnesota and Oregon attorneys general have all announced investigations. The Massachusetts attorney general is reviewing complaints.
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HEADLINE	01/24 DOH: 2 stealth omicron variant cases
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/washington-state-reports-two-cases-of-omicron-subvariant-ba-2
GIST	<p>A new subvariant of omicron that differs from the original variant in some mutations, including on the spike protein, has been detected in Washington state.</p> <p>"Two cases of BA.2, a subvariant of omicron, were detected earlier this month in Washington," a spokesperson for the Washington Department of Health told Fox News Digital on Monday.</p> <p>The spokesperson said that health officials do not have much information on the new subvariant, which has been reported in parts of Europe and Asia.</p> <p>United Kingdom health authorities declared BA.2 a "variant under investigation" on Friday, saying that "there is still uncertainty around the significance of the changes to the viral genome."</p> <p>Viruses mutate as they spread through a population, with some mutations impacting vaccine effectiveness, as well as the lethality and transmissibility of variants, according to the CDC.</p> <p>The World Health Organization said Monday that BA.2 differs from the original omicron strain on the spike protein, emphasizing that the two subvariants should be studied independently to determine "immune escape properties and virulence."</p> <p>Two cases of BA.2 have also been detected in Houston, where Dr. Hana El Sahly dubbed it "stealth omicron" since it is harder to pick up on a PCR test, according to WOAI.</p> <p>Omicron, which was first detected in South Africa in late November, has rapidly spread throughout the world and is now responsible for 99.5% of all new cases in the United States, according to CDC data.</p> <p>While studies show that the new variant can more easily evade immunity offered by vaccines and prior infection, it is also associated with less severe disease.</p> <p>The 7-day average for new cases throughout the United States was at 686,715 on Saturday, down from an all-time high of 789,960 on Jan. 15.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 IRS change taxpayer access online account
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/irs-id-me-tax-file-2022/
GIST	<p>Starting this summer, taxpayers wanting to access their online accounts on IRS.gov will be required to take a selfie and verify their identity with ID.me.</p> <p>Existing online accounts with IRS.gov will no longer work as of the middle of 2022, the agency says.</p> <p>The IRS says the move is necessary to protect taxpayers from potential identity theft, but privacy advocates say it's invasive and point out that the company behind ID.me has a spotty record in verifying people's identities.</p> <p>The move "will only lead to further ruin for Americans when their data is inevitably breached," Jackie Singh, director of technology and operations at the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, said on Twitter.</p> <p>Millions of users</p>

The online IRS services that will soon require verification were used 60 million times in the last fiscal year, STOP estimated.

An IRS spokesperson did not answer a query on how many accounts had been created on the agency's site. The spokesperson noted that Americans would not need to take a selfie or make an ID.me account in order to file their tax return, calling the notion "wildly inaccurate."

"The IRS emphasizes taxpayers can pay or file their taxes without submitting a selfie or other information to a third-party identity verification company. Tax payments can be made from a bank account, by credit card or by other means without the use of facial recognition technology or registering for an account," the spokesperson said in a statement.

However, taxpayers will need to register with the new security system to see records of previous payments, see previous years' transcripts or to access their Child Tax Credit portal.

CPAs commonly advise taxpayers to request a transcript from the IRS — which details all income that employers, banks or online platforms have reported to the agency — before filing a return.

Additional IRS tools will transition to use ID.me verification "over the next year," the agency [said](#).

A long verification process

ID.me, a 12-year-old company that started as a way for military veterans to get discounts, has boomed during the pandemic, becoming the government's default ID-verification system. The company has pulled in over \$200 million in venture funding and secured contracts with [27 states](#) as they try to root out fraud in the unemployment system, for instance. Bloomberg [puts](#) the company's value at \$1.5 billion.

Facial recognition is already extensively used by federal and state governments. A Government Accountability Office report [last year](#) found that 20 agencies used internal face-recognition systems, mostly to identify criminal activity. The GAO also concluded that most departments didn't track their use of non-government systems and didn't consider the "privacy and accuracy" risks of this technology.

Security researcher Brian Krebs first [spotted](#) the change on the IRS' website and detailed the extensive process of verifying his identity with ID.me.

To sign up for an account, users need to provide an email address and a landline or mobile phone number, upload identity documents and take a selfie with a camera that will then scan the user's face to verify their identity. If the application flags any issues with a taxpayer's documents, the person will be asked to do a video chat or phone call with an ID.me representative.

"[F]or anyone who fails the automated signup, count on spending several hours getting verified," Krebs wrote.

The user is also required to agree to the use of their biometric data, which ID.me [says](#) can include hand prints, face scans, facial geometry and retina scans.

A Gizmodo reporter began the process of [verifying his identity](#) with ID.me but said he stopped when ID.me requested access to his credit report.

Face-recognition software generally has been documented to [have many flaws](#), including being more likely to mis-match Black, Asian and Native American faces than White faces.

CEO: More equitable, more secure

ID.me CEO Blake Hall defended the process as both more secure and fairer than the previous method of logging into IRS.gov. For instance, setting up an IRS.gov account currently requires verifying your identity with a credit card — a step that leaves out taxpayers without credit.

"The most damaging thing that can happen to your privacy is not taking a selfie, it's having somebody get access to your medical records, or to your tax information," Hall told CBS MoneyWatch. "That selfie control is actively preventing a massive amount of identity theft."

Verification game

The IRS has sometimes struggled to protect taxpayers' data, even [shutting down its online transcript service](#) back in 2015 after it was found that fraudsters were using it to steal identities.

"Privacy and data theft is significant at the IRS. They are deathly afraid of a hack," said Daniel Morris, a CPA based in California.

"The service is trying to modernize, and make sure from a data protection standpoint ... they want to make sure that someone who is getting your data is authorized," Morris said.

However, ID.me is not without its problems. The system has been plagued by complaints from frustrated unemployment recipients who said they couldn't get past the verification process, with one California senator blaming it for putting "thousands of legitimate claims in limbo," Bloomberg reported.

In Colorado, one unemployment recipient spent months getting verified because he lacked high-speed internet, Colorado Public Radio [reported](#).

Hall said that 90% of people who sign up with ID.me get through the automated checking method and that the technology meets the government's highest [standards](#) for identity verification.

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HEADLINE	01/24 IRS: incorrect child tax credit letter info
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/child-tax-credit-irs-incorrect-letter-taxpayers/
GIST	<p>The IRS is sending letters to millions of parents who received the advanced Child Tax Credit payments last year, urging people to refer to those forms — letter 6419 — when filling out their tax returns. But on Monday, the agency warned that some of those letters may include incorrect information.</p> <p>The erroneous information could have a severe impact on some families' finances, given that the IRS is advising taxpayers to take extra care this year that their tax returns are accurate. The agency is still digging out of a backlog of 6 million individual returns filed in 2021 — many of those were flagged for review because of mistakes taxpayers made in reporting how much they received in government stimulus payments or other tax credits.</p> <p>A tax refund is often the biggest check a family receives each year, with payments in 2021 averaging about \$2,800. That means there's a lot on the line if a family misreports the amount they received in their advanced CTC payments. A processing holdup at the IRS could result in refunds being delayed for weeks or even months.</p> <p>The IRS said it is unclear how many people received erroneous letters, but said it could be a small group of taxpayers who moved or changed bank accounts in December. In those cases, the CTC checks may have been undeliverable, or the direct deposits bounced from the bank where an account was closed, Ken Corbin, the IRS chief taxpayer experience officer, said Monday on a conference call with reporters.</p> <p>"Then the letters may not reflect what the taxpayer actually received," Corbin said.</p> <p>Taxpayers who are concerned the letter they received isn't correct should check IRS.gov and log into their account through the site, he said. The IRS.gov website will have the correct information that the taxpayer should use on their tax return, he noted.</p> <p>"We want taxpayers to have the info they need to file an accurate return," Corbin said.</p>

New Child Tax Credit website

Also on Monday, the federal government launched a revamped website to help people who were eligible for the expanded child tax credit claim the second half of the payment they were due.

This is an example of the Letter 6419 that the IRS is sending to parents who received advanced Child Tax Credit payments in 2021. The IRS is asking taxpayers to keep the letters and refer to them when preparing their tax returns in order to accurately record the amount they received last year. However, the IRS said January 24 that some letters were mailed with erroneous information on payments. IRS.GOV

The site, ChildTaxCredit.gov, features a new tool that directs taxpayers to filing options, eligibility information and instructions on how to get the credit, according to the Treasury Department. Both virtual and in-person support will be provided in multiple languages.

"A very frustrating filing season"

The potentially erroneous letters could add to what IRS Commissioner Chuck Rettig warned may be "a very frustrating filing season" for taxpayers and tax preparers. He also encourages taxpayers to follow these tips to ensure smooth processing of their returns:

1. File electronically.
2. File as quickly as possible after the IRS starts accepting tax returns on January 24.
3. Request direct deposit.

"If taxpayers need a refund quickly, we are urging them to not file on paper," Rettig said.

Filing an inaccurate return — such as by guessing how much you received from the advanced CTC payments — could "create an expensive delay," he added.

If taxpayers heed that advice and there are no red flags on their tax return, they should receive their refund within 21 days, according to the IRS. Asked how long it could take to get a refund if, say, someone files on paper or has a mistake in their returns, Corbin said, "Right now we aren't really sure."

Reporting accurate data about the advanced CTC payments is important because the enhanced tax credit was paid half in advance, with the other half to be paid through taxpayers' refunds after they file their 2021 tax return.

For instance, families with children under 6 are entitled to \$3,600 in tax credits, with \$1,800 paid in monthly checks from July 2021 through December 2021. The remaining \$1,800 will be claimed on their 2021 tax return. But if a family incorrectly says they received \$1,500 in CTC payments last year and then claims \$2,100 on their tax return — more than they are entitled to — the IRS will flag the return for review, delaying their refund.

Corbin said he believes the erroneous letters were sent to a small group of taxpayers rather than millions of parents. "The online portal is correct, and we encourage them to check IRS.gov," he said.

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HEADLINE	01/24 FDA curbs use antibody drugs: ineffective
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/fda-curbs-antibody-drugs-sidelined-omicron-82448293
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON -- COVID-19 antibody drugs from Regeneron and Eli Lilly should no longer be used because they don't work against the omicron variant that now accounts for nearly all U.S. infections, U.S. health regulators said Monday.</p> <p>The Food and Drug Administration said it was revoking emergency authorization for both drugs, which were purchased by the federal government and have been administered to millions of Americans with COVID-19. If the drugs prove effective against future variants, the FDA said it could reauthorize their use.</p>

The regulatory move was expected because both drugmakers had said the infusion drugs are less able to target omicron due to its mutations. Still, the federal action could trigger pushback from some Republican governors who have continued promoting the drugs against the advice of health experts.

Omicron's resistance to the two leading monoclonal antibody medicines has upended the treatment playbook for COVID-19 in recent weeks.

Doctors have alternate therapies to battle early COVID-19 cases, including two new antiviral pills from Pfizer and Merck, but both are in short supply. An antibody drug from GlaxoSmithKline that remains effective also is in short supply.

The drugs are laboratory-made versions of virus-blocking antibodies. They are intended to head off severe disease and death by supplying concentrated doses of one or two antibodies early in an infection. Then-President Donald Trump received Regeneron's antibody combination after he tested positive for the coronavirus in 2020.

The FDA noted in its decision that omicron accounts for more than 99% of U.S. infections, making it "highly unlikely" the antibodies would help people now seeking treatment. The agency said restricting their use would also eliminate unnecessary drug side effects, including allergic reactions.

The U.S. government temporarily stopped distributing the two drugs in late December, as omicron was racing across the country to become the dominant variant. But officials resumed distribution after complaints from Republican governors, including Florida's Ron DeSantis, who claimed that the drugs continued to help some omicron patients.

DeSantis has heavily promoted antibody drugs as a signature part of his administration's COVID-19 response, setting up infusion sites and lauding them at news conferences, while opposing vaccine mandates and other public health measures. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has also launched state-sponsored infusion sites.

The drugs are not a substitute for vaccination and are generally reserved for people who are the most vulnerable, including seniors, transplant recipients and those with conditions like heart disease and diabetes.

Since early January, the U.S. government has shipped enough doses of the two antibodies to treat more than 300,000 patients.

Both Regeneron and Lilly previously announced they were developing new antibodies that target omicron.

The move comes days after regulators broadened the use of remdesivir — the first drug approved for COVID-19 — to treat more patients.

On Friday, the FDA expanded the antiviral's approval to include adults and children with early COVID-19 who face a high risk of ending up in the hospital. Remdesivir previously had been limited to hospitalized patients.

An influential panel of federal experts had already recommended using the infused drug to try to head off hospitalization. The same guidelines from the National Institutes of Health panel recommend against continued use of Lilly and Regeneron's antibody drugs due to their reduced effectiveness against omicron.

Still, many hospitals will face challenges in ramping up remdesivir treatments. The drug requires three consecutive IV infusions over three days, when used for nonhospitalized patients. That time-consuming process won't be an option for many over-capacity hospitals facing staff shortages.

The FDA made its decision based on a 560-patient study that showed a nearly 90% reduction in hospitalizations when remdesivir is given within seven days of symptoms. The study predates the omicron

	variant but, like other antivirals, remdesivir is expected to maintain its performance against the latest variant.
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HEADLINE	01/24 Seattle hospitals reach breaking points
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/seattle-hospitals-breaking-point-amid-covid-crush-patients/story?id=82438895
GIST	<p>Seattle doctors say hospitals are reaching their breaking points as they deal with a crush of COVID-19 patients amid the latest surge fueled by the omicron variant.</p> <p>Between Jan. 13 and Jan. 19, there has been an average of 64 new hospitalizations per day with a total of 449 during the week, according to county health department data.</p> <p>This is a 460% increase from the 80 hospitalizations that were occurring over a one-week period just a month ago.</p> <p>Additionally, 19.9 per 100,000 residents have been hospitalized over the seven-day period, according to health data.</p> <p>As of this weekend, UW Medicine -- which has four hospitals across its system -- reported more than 200 COVID-19 patients for the first time ever.</p> <p>By comparison, at the end of November, there were about 30 patients infected with the virus across the system, according to Dr. John Lynch, an infectious disease expert at Harborview Medical Center in Seattle and UW Medicine medical lead for the COVID-19 response.</p> <p>"I think we're closer now to a crisis -- like a true crisis in health care -- we're closer than we've ever been during this entire pandemic," Lynch told ABC News.</p> <p>He said this is due to several factors, including the number of patients getting sick, hospitals reaching capacity, an exhausted health care workforce and the frustration of COVID patients being admitted to hospitals who are unvaccinated.</p> <p>Before the omicron surge, unvaccinated King County residents were nine times more likely to be hospitalized and die, according to Public Health Seattle. During the omicron surge, unvaccinated people are now 12 times more likely to be hospitalized and 20 times more likely to die.</p> <p>"We have these incredible vaccines that are so good at protecting us from serious disease and death, and yet people continue to ... not get vaccinated and that ends up leading to them in the hospital," Lynch said. "Health care workers don't want to see people suffer and it is just so hard to see a big group of folks in the ICU because of something that was completely preventable."</p> <p>Lynch said most hospitals across Washington state were already very full when the omicron surge struck compared to other times during the pandemic, making it even more challenging to find enough beds, secure enough resources and prevent understaffing.</p> <p>"My facility at Harborview, we were already about 100 patients over our normal capacity when the omicron surge hit," he said. "Then the omicron surge came and so you basically had to absorb all these more patients, all of whom required precautions."</p> <p>Lynch urged residents to help ease the burden on hospitals by wearing masks indoors, getting vaccinated and boosted and avoiding large gatherings so they don't potentially contract the virus and get seriously ill.</p> <p>"We need your help in health care right now, in hospitals, in clinics, in emergency departments," he said. "We need to slow down the number of new cases of COVID-19. That means please take every precaution not to get infected, not to end up in the hospital."</p>

HEADLINE	01/25 SKorea cases at new high ahead of holidays
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/korea-sets-high-8000-virus-cases-ahead-holiday-82452155
GIST	<p>SEOUL, South Korea -- South Korea recorded more than 8,000 new coronavirus infections for the first time Tuesday as health authorities reshape the country's pandemic response to address a surge driven by the highly contagious omicron variant.</p> <p>The 8,571 new cases reported by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency followed three straight days exceeding 7,000. With omicron spreading more than twice as fast as the delta strain that cause the last surge, experts say new cases may exceed 10,000 this week and possibly 20,000 after the Lunar New Year's holiday break that begins this weekend and continues to next Wednesday.</p> <p>To prevent a sudden explosion of infections from overwhelming hospitals and disrupting workplaces and essential services, South Korea will reduce quarantine periods, expand testing and treat more people at home.</p> <p>From Wednesday, the quarantine periods for people who test positive after being fully vaccinated will be reduced from the current 10 days to seven days. Fully vaccinated people who comes in close contact with virus carriers won't be placed under quarantine. Officials are also planning to treat a larger number of mild or moderate cases at home and expand the use of rapid antigen tests to detect more infections sooner.</p> <p>Park Hyang, a senior Health Ministry official, pleaded people to stay home during the upcoming holidays and get vaccinated if they haven't already. While those who aren't fully vaccinated account for less than 7% of South Koreans who are 12 years or older, these people have accounted for about 60% of serious cases and deaths in the past eight weeks, Park said during a briefing.</p> <p>"While infections are increasing, cases among people in their 60s or older, who are at higher risk of serious illness and death, have so far remained at a low level," Park said. "We believe this is because the rate of people in that age group who received booster shots has now rose to 84.9%."</p> <p>Omicron has become the dominant variant in many countries and more easily infects those who have been vaccinated or had COVID-19 previously. But vaccination and booster shots still provide strong protection from serious illness, hospitalization and death.</p> <p>More than 85% of South Korea's more than 51 million people have been fully vaccinated. The KDCA said 50.1% of the population have been administered booster shots as of Tuesday afternoon.</p>
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Cyber Awareness

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HEADLINE	01/24 Tech salaries hit record high; underpaid?
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/tech-salaries-just-hit-record-highs-but-nearly-half-of-workers-still-feel-underpaid/
GIST	<p>A "widespread hunger" for technology professionals has see the average salary for technologists in the US hit a record high of \$104,566 in 2021 – and yet, nearly half of tech workers feel they are underpaid.</p> <p>The latest Dice Tech Salary Report found that 61% of technologists received a salary increase last year, up from 52% in 2020. Web developers saw the biggest increase in pay, shooting up by more than a fifth (21.3%) to \$98,912, while the highest salaries were demanded by IT management, whose pay rose 6% to \$151,983 between 2020 and 2021.</p>

Perhaps unsurprisingly, these pay increases translate into greater satisfaction amongst tech workers. Of the more than 7,200 technologists who responded to Dice's survey, 67% reported being either 'very satisfied' or 'somewhat satisfied' with their salary – up from 55.5% in 2020. At the same time, the proportion who reported feeling very or somewhat dissatisfied with their pay dropped from nearly a third (30.2%) in 2020, to just 10.2% last year.

But despite rising salaries and greater satisfaction with their pay, tech workers do not feel they are being adequately compensated for their time: 47.8% of survey respondents felt they were underpaid – a marginal increase of nearly 2% compared to 2020.

A few factors might be contributing to this, said Dice. For example, the low tech unemployment rate and the ever-increasing number of job vacancies may have led technologists to re-evaluate their current position. "Tech professionals are themselves or seeing their peers receive large compensation and other benefit increases as enticements to leave their current roles for another organization," Dice CEO, Art Zeile, told ZDNet.

"The close-to-historic low tech unemployment rate and the skyrocketing demand for technologists have created an environment in which technologists with varied levels of skills and experiences are being wooed by organizations that can afford to pay a premium, and that's likely driving some of the dissatisfaction in pay."

There is also dissatisfaction among women about their salaries. [Dice's 2021 Equality in Tech Report](#) showed that some 35% of women reported dissatisfaction with their current compensation, and 49% of women reported feeling underpaid relative to their male counterparts.

Despite technologists feeling underpaid, most are not fighting for pay rises. When asked whether they negotiated their compensation at their most recent salary review, 69% of respondents to Dice's survey replied 'No'.

This compares to 48% of tech workers who negotiated their salary for a new job at a new company. The main reason given by 10% of respondents who reported receiving a salary decrease in 2021 was because they changed employers.

Pay isn't everything, however: alongside staple benefits, such as paid vacation days, health and dental care, and paid sick days, tech workers also increasingly want employers to offer more flexible work schedules, training and remote-working stipends, and childcare support.

Zeile said these findings were "not only a reflection of an organization's adjustment to the future of work," but also highlighted areas where organizations could be competitive in attracting and retaining talent.

"For organizations to attract talent in an ultra-competitive market, one of the most important components is to take the time to truly understand what technologists want and need in their ideal work environments and cultures, and that means starting to close the gap between the benefits that are important to employees versus what they're being offered."

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HEADLINE	01/24 DTPacker malware delivers RATs
SOURCE	https://threatpost.com/donald-trump-packer-malware-infostealers/177887/
GIST	<p>A new .NET malware packer being used to deliver a variety of remote access trojans (RATs) and infostealers has a fixed password named after Donald Trump, giving the new find its name, "DTPacker."</p> <p>DTPacker was discovered by researchers at Proofpoint who, since 2020, have observed it being used by several threat actors in campaigns targeting hundreds of thousands of end users with thousands of malicious messages across many sectors.</p>

One notable campaign, which lasted for weeks, used fake Liverpool Football Club (LFC) sites to lure users to download DTPacker, ultimately delivering [Agent Tesla](#), the researchers found. [Ave Maria](#), AsyncRAT and [FormBook](#) have also been spread by DTPacker, according to a [Monday report](#).

“From March 2021, Proofpoint observed samples using websites for soccer clubs and their fans being used as download locations,” the report said. “These websites appear to have been decoys, with the actual payload locations embedded in the list.”

The ProofPoint team that discovered DTPacker reported that the malware is notable because it delivers both embedded payloads (the packer), as well as those fetched from a command-and-control server (a downloader). The second stage includes a fixed password for decoding, which in all DTPacker instances, reference the former president.

DTPacker’s Dual-Payload Delivery

“The main difference between a packer and a downloader is the location of the payload data, which is embedded in the former and downloaded in the latter,” the analysts noted. “DTPacker uses both forms, it is unusual for a piece of malware to be both a packer and a downloader.”

“Proofpoint observed multiple decoding methods and two Donald Trump-themed fixed keys, thus the name ‘DTPacker,’” according to the report. The earlier DTPacker version used “trump2020,” but beginning last August, a version using “Trump2026,” emerged, the firm added.

The researchers predicted that the DTPacker malware will continue to be used by threat actors and traded around [underground forums](#).

“It is unknown why the malware author specifically referred to Donald Trump in the malware’s fixed passwords, as it is not used to specifically target politicians or political organizations and would not be seen by the intended victims,” the analysts added. “Proofpoint assesses this malware will continue to be used by multiple threat actors.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 Russia’s cybercrime-harboring reputation
SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/analysis/policy/russia-makes-more-arrests-but-cybercrime-harboring-reputation-hard-to-shake
GIST	<p>Russian authorities announced the arrests of four members of the Infraud group over the weekend, according to state media outlet TASS. It is the second such series of arrests in recent weeks for a country that, until recently, had been widely considered a sanctuary for cybercriminals. But experts say it's too soon to consider Russia's harboring days over.</p> <p>"The Russians are always trying to game the U.S., so they're not turning over a new leaf, it's calculating how much it will take to pacify the Americans," said James Lewis, director of the Strategic Technologies program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and a former cyber-diplomat for the United States.</p> <p>For years, cybercriminals living in Russia operated with the tacit understanding that Moscow would not investigate anyone targeting foreign victims. That understanding even changed how ransomware is designed — major varieties of ransomware will typically not deploy on a system if Russian-language keyboards are installed. At the same time, Russia used cybercrime as a component of its espionage operations, like in the wiper-disguised-as-ransomware NotPetya.</p> <p>But the surprise arrests of members of the REvil ransomware group two weeks ago by Russian intelligence threw that reputation into question, a shakeup furthered by the weekend arrests of the Infraud group. Neither group was active at the time of arrest. REvil had been a major affiliate</p>

ransomware organization until global law enforcement crackdowns on its servers earlier this year. Infraud, which existed until 2018, was a carding and bank account theft ring.

Pressuring Russia to take on harboring has been a key component of U.S. strategies toward cybercrime. President Joe Biden [made it a central issue](#) of his first summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier this year, with [several proposals](#) proposing everything from sanctions to visa restrictions if Russia did not comply.

"Russia could have many reasons for taking these actions, which may have nothing to do with wanting to crack down on cybercrime emanating from Russian territory. Thus, it's too soon to tell what's going on and why Russia has chosen to arrest these individuals," said Michael Daniel, president and CEO of the industry threat-sharing group the Cyber Threat Alliance and former White House cybersecurity coordinator under President Obama.

"If they remain in custody and face trial, then that would be a big step forward in indicating a turn towards more responsible behavior. On the other hand, if these individuals are quietly released in a few days, with no further action, then the actions might be for show."

Daniel said he would be pleased to welcome a Russia to the global community fighting against cybercrime, even if he is not entirely sold if that is their current intent. But even if Russia is not fully on board, Lewis said, a half-measure is still far more than no measure.

"[It's] not necessarily bad if it gets a good outcome and it's probably the best we can hope for," he said. "I still count it as a success for the U.S. as it put the Kremlin on notice."

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HEADLINE	01/24 Facebook's new massive supercomputer
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/facebook-trumpets-massive-new-supercomputer
GIST	<p>Facebook's parent company Meta announced on Monday it was launching one of the world's most powerful supercomputers to boost its capacity to process data, despite persistent disputes over privacy and disinformation.</p> <p>The US tech giant said the array of machines could process images and video up to 20 times faster than their current systems.</p> <p>"The experiences we're building for the metaverse require enormous compute power (quintillions of operations / second!)," wrote Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg on Facebook, referring to his idea of a 3D internet where users don virtual reality headsets and sensor equipment to create an immersive experience.</p> <p>The firm envisages developing Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools that will, among other things, allow people speaking in several different languages to understand each other in real-time.</p> <p>Meta said the machine, known as AI Research SuperCluster (RSC), was already in the top five fastest supercomputers and would become the fastest AI machine in the world when fully built in the next few months.</p> <p>Platforms like Facebook and Google have long been criticised for the way they process and utilize the data they take from their users.</p> <p>The two firms currently face legal cases across the European Union that allege data transfers from the bloc to the United States are illegal.</p> <p>And the AI algorithms that funnel Facebook users towards appealing posts have been criticised for helping to fuel disinformation and hate speech.</p>

	<p>'Tech superpower'</p> <p>Facebook has apologised repeatedly about the adverse effects of its algorithms and has long flagged its investment in content moderators and other measures to tackle problematic posts.</p> <p>European Digital Rights, a network of NGOs campaigning for big tech to be reined in, acknowledged on Monday that Facebook had made efforts to improve but questioned what the firm might do with such a powerful tool.</p> <p>"Nothing good can come from all of that computer power in the hands of such a tech superpower," Diego Naranjo, the group's head of policy, told AFP.</p> <p>In a blog post announcing the supercomputer on Monday, two of Meta's AI research team stressed that weeding out harmful content was among the "critical use cases" for its AI development.</p> <p>The researchers wrote that high-definition video was creating ever greater demand for processing power at the same time as the company was pushing for AI tools based on trillions of examples.</p> <p>"We hope RSC will help us build entirely new AI systems that can, for example, power real-time voice translations to large groups of people, each speaking a different language, so they can seamlessly collaborate on a research project or play an AR game together," wrote the researchers.</p> <p>"Ultimately, the work done with RSC will pave the way toward building technologies for the next major computing platform -- the metaverse, where AI-driven applications and products will play an important role."</p> <p>Zuckerberg has been pushing harder than his big tech rivals to develop the idea of the metaverse.</p> <p>Facebook has not yet confirmed the location of its supercomputer, telling AFP the information was confidential.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Data breaches surge 68% to all-time high
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/us-data-breaches-surge-68/
GIST	<p>The volume of publicly reported data compromises in the US soared 68% year-on-year to a record high of 1862, according to new data from the Identity Theft Resource Center (ITRC).</p> <p>The non-profit said the figure was 23% higher than the previous record, set in 2017.</p> <p>The number of victims was down 5%, continuing a recent trend as threat actors focus their efforts on collecting specific data types rather than acquiring mass troves of data indiscriminately.</p> <p>Ransomware continues to be a significant driver of the overall upward trend for breaches: data compromises related to these attacks have doubled in each of the past two years. Ransomware is on course to surpass phishing as the number one cause of breaches in 2022, the ITRC claimed.</p> <p>Although the report covers leaked and breached data, compromises stemming from cyber-attacks were by far the most significant cause. In fact, there were more of these incidents in 2021 (1603) than there were data compromises in 2020 (1108).</p> <p>The manufacturing and utilities sector reported the largest percentage increase in data compromises, up 217% over 2020. Every sector saw a rise in incidents bar the military vertical, where there were no publicly reported breaches.</p> <p>Reporting is also becoming more opaque: the number of data breach notices that did not reveal the root cause of a compromise (607) grew by over 190% year-on-year in 2021.</p>

The only positive from the report was that the number of data events involving sensitive information like Social Security numbers increased only slightly year-on-year. It nudged up from 80% to 83% over the period but is still well below the record high of 95% in 2017.

ITRC president and CEO Eva Velasquez argued that 2021 had seen a shift in the identity crime space.

“Too many people found themselves in between criminals and organizations that hold consumer information. We may look back at 2021 as the year when we moved from the era of identity theft to identity fraud,” she said.

“The number of breaches in 2021 was alarming. Many of the cyber-attacks committed were highly sophisticated and complex, requiring aggressive defenses to prevent them. If those defenses failed, too often we saw an inadequate level of transparency for consumers to protect themselves from identity fraud.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 Malicious PowerPoint files push RATs
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/malicious-powerpoint-files-used-to-push-remote-access-trojans/
GIST	<p>Since December 2021, a growing trend in phishing campaigns has emerged that uses malicious PowerPoint documents to distribute various types of malware, including remote access and information-stealing trojans.</p> <p>According to a report by Netskope’s Threat Labs shared with Bleeping Computer before publication, the actors are using PowerPoint files combined with legitimate cloud services that host the malware payloads.</p> <p>The families deployed in the tracked campaign are Warzone (aka AveMaria) and AgentTesla, two powerful RATs and info-stealers that target many applications, while the researchers also noticed the dropping of cryptocurrency stealers.</p> <p>Sliding malware into Windows devices</p> <p>The malicious PowerPoint phishing attachment contains obfuscated macro executed via a combination of PowerShell and MSHTA, both built-in Windows tools.</p> <p>The VBS script is then de-obfuscated and adds new Windows registry entries for persistence, leading to the execution of two scripts. The first one fetches AgentTesla from an external URL, and the second disables Windows Defender.</p> <p>Additionally, the VBS creates a scheduled task that executes a script every hour, which fetches a PowerShell cryptocurrency stealer from a Blogger URL.</p> <p>The malware payloads</p> <p>AgentTesla is a .NET-based RAT (remote access trojan) that can steal browser passwords, log keystrokes, steal clipboard contents, etc.</p> <p>It is executed by PowerShell and comes slightly obfuscated, while there’s also a function that injects the payload into an instance of “aspnet_compiler.exe”.</p> <p>The second payload delivered in this campaign is Warzone, also a RAT, but Netskope doesn’t give many details about it in the report.</p> <p>The cryptocurrency stealer is the third payload of this campaign, which checks the clipboard data with a regex that matches cryptocurrency wallet patterns. If found, it replaces the recipient’s address with one under the actor’s control.</p>

The stealer supports Bitcoin, Ethereum, XMR, DOGE, and more. Netskope has published the complete list of IoCs (indicators of compromise) for this campaign, including all wallets used by the actors on [this GitHub page](#).

PowerPoint becoming a problem

In December 2021, Fortinet reported about a similar [DHL-themed](#) campaign that [also used PowerPoint documents](#) to drop Agent Tesla.

Users must treat this document type with as much vigilance as they have when receiving Excel files since macro code in PP files can be equally as dangerous and catastrophic.

In this case, the actors also threw cloud services in the mix, hosting their malicious payloads on various legitimate platforms that are unlikely to raise any red flags with security tools.

As such, the most dependable protection measure is to handle all unsolicited communications with caution and also to keep macros on your Microsoft Office suite disabled.

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HEADLINE	01/24 Ransom gangs enlist insiders for attacks
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/ransomware-gangs-increase-efforts-to-enlist-insiders-for-attacks/
GIST	<p>A recent survey of 100 large (over 5,000 employees) North American IT firms shows that ransomware actors are making greater effort to recruit insiders in targeted firms to aid in attacks.</p> <p>The survey was conducted by Hitachi ID, which performed a similar study in November 2021. Compared to the previous survey, there has been a 17% rise in the number of employees offered money to aid in ransomware attacks against their employer.</p> <p>Most specifically, 65% of the survey respondents say that they or their employees were approached between December 7, 2021, and January 4, 2022, to help hackers establish initial access.</p> <p>In most cases, the threat actors used email and social media to contact employees, but 27% of their approach efforts were conducted via phone calls, a direct and brazen means of contact.</p> <p>As for the money offered to the employees, most received an offer below \$500,000, but some proposals were north of a million USD.</p> <p>In half of those cases, ransomware gangs attacked the targeted company even without any insider help.</p> <p>This shows that once a firm is a candidate for a ransomware attack, the rest is just about exploring potential ways to make the infiltration easier and less likely to be detected.</p> <p>An ignored area</p> <p>As reflected in the findings of the Hitachi ID survey, insider threats are generally ignored, underrated, and not accounted for when developing cybersecurity plans.</p> <p>When IT executives were questioned about how concerned they are about internal threats, 36% responded with more concern about external threats, with 3% not worried about threats at all.</p> <p>Since last summer, when the LockBit 2.0 ransomware operation openly invited rogue employees to help them gain corporate network access, the awareness around the issue has been raised, but the problem persists.</p>

	<p>CISA released a tool that can help companies assess their stance against insider threats in September 2021, warning that the particular trend is rising.</p> <p>The entities that decided to do something about the issue increased employee training and sent fake emails to employees in critical areas with reports of disgruntled employees or low-performance indicators. However, most haven't implemented specific security measures to curb the problem.</p> <p>Ideal timing</p> <p>The fact that the United States is going through a job quitting surge called the "Great Resignation" raises the chances of success for ransomware actors in these peculiar negotiations.</p> <p>Today, many companies have employees on the verge of quitting or who have already decided to leave but wait for the right moment, and an unexpected offer involving a large sum of money may be enticing for some.</p> <p>An increasing number of people feel over-stressed, underpaid, exploited, exhausted, or don't feel like work is worth their time and energy anymore.</p> <p>These people may be seen as ideal candidates for ransomware gangs who entice them with a hefty payment to be short-term accomplices.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 BRATA wipes Androids after stealing data
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/android-malware-brata-wipes-your-device-after-stealing-data/
GIST	<p>The Android malware known as BRATA has added new and dangerous features to its latest version, including GPS tracking, the capacity to use multiple communication channels, and a function that performs a factory reset on the device to wipe all traces of malicious activity.</p> <p>BRATA was first spotted by Kaspersky back in 2019 as an Android RAT (remote access tool) that mainly targeted Brazilian users.</p> <p>In December 2021, a report by Cleafy underscored the emergence of the malware in Europe, where it was seen targeting e-banking users and stealing their credentials with the involvement of fraudsters posing as bank customer support agents.</p> <p>Analysts at Cleafy continued to monitor BRATA for new features, and in a new report published today, illustrate how the malware continues to evolve.</p> <p>Tailored versions for different audiences</p> <p>The latest versions of the BRATA malware now target e-banking users in the UK, Poland, Italy, Spain, China, and Latin America.</p> <p>Each variant focuses on different banks with dedicated overlay sets, languages, and even different apps to target specific audiences.</p> <p>The authors use similar obfuscation techniques in all versions, such as wrapping the APK file into an encrypted JAR or DEX package.</p> <p>New features</p> <p>The new features spotted by Cleafy researchers in the latest BRATA versions include keylogging functionality, which complements the existing screen capturing function.</p> <p>Although its exact purpose remains a mystery to the analysts, all new variants also have GPS tracking.</p>

	<p>The scariest of the new malicious features is the performing of factory resets, which the actors perform in the following situations:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The compromise has been completed successfully, and the fraudulent transaction is over (i.e. credentials have been exfiltrated). 2. The application has detected that it runs on a virtual environment, most probably for analysis. <p>BRATA uses factory resets as a kill switch for self-protection, but since they wipe the device, they also introduce the possibility of sudden and irreversible loss of data for the victim.</p> <p>Finally, BRATA has added new communication channels for exchanging data with the C2 server and now supports HTTP and WebSockets.</p> <p>The option of WebSockets gives the actors a direct and low-latency channel that is ideal for real-time communication and live manual exploitation.</p> <p>Moreover, because WebSockets doesn't need to send headers with each connection, the volume of suspicious network traffic is reduced, and by extension, the chances of being detected are minimized.</p> <p>BRATA is only one of many Android banking trojans and stealthy RATs circulating in the wild, targeting people's banking credentials.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Critical SonicWall RCE bug targeted
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/attackers-now-actively-targeting-critical-sonicwall-rce-bug/
GIST	<p>A critical severity vulnerability impacting SonicWall's Secure Mobile Access (SMA) gateways addressed last month is now targeted in ongoing exploitation attempts.</p> <p>The bug, found by Rapid7 Lead Security Researcher Jacob Baines, is an unauthenticated stack-based buffer overflow tracked as CVE-2021-20038 that impacts SMA 100 series appliances (including SMA 200, 210, 400, 410, and 500v) even when the web application firewall (WAF) is enabled.</p> <p>Successful exploitation can let remote unauthenticated attackers execute code as the 'nobody' user in compromised SonicWall appliances.</p> <p>"There are no temporary mitigations. SonicWall urges impacted customers to implement applicable patches as soon as possible," the company said in December after releasing CVE-2021-20038 security updates adding that it found no evidence the bug was exploited in the wild at the time.</p> <p>However, today, Richard Warren, a Principal Security Consultant at NCC Group, said that threat actors are now attempting to exploit the vulnerability in the wild.</p> <p>Warren added that attackers are also trying to brute force their way in by password spraying known SonicWall appliances default passwords.</p> <p>"Some attempts itw on CVE-2021-20038 (SonicWall SMA RCE). Also some password spraying of default passwords from the past few days. Remember to update AND change default password," the security researcher tweeted today.</p> <p>"They don't look successful as far as I can tell," Warren also told BleepingComputer. "Using that exploit you need to make a huge number of requests (like a million). They are probably just trying their luck or don't understand the exploit."</p> <p>Patch now to defend against attackers</p>

While these ongoing attacks haven't yet been successful, SonicWall customers are advised to patch their SMA 100 appliances to block hacking attempts.

SMA 100 users are recommended to log in to their [MySonicWall.com](https://mysonicwall.com) accounts to upgrade the firmware to versions outlined in this [SonicWall PSIRT Advisory](#).

Assistance on how to upgrade the firmware is available [in this knowledgebase article](#) or by contacting [SonicWall's support](#).

SonicWall SMA 100 appliances have been targeted in multiple campaigns since the start of 2021, including in attacks coordinated by ransomware gangs.

For instance, the [CVE-2021-20016](#) SMA 100 zero-day was used [to deploy FiveHands ransomware](#) starting with January 2021 when it was also exploited in attacks against [SonicWall's internal systems](#). Before being patched two weeks later, in [early February 2021](#), the same flaw was also [abused indiscriminately in the wild](#).

In July, SonicWall warned of [the increased risk of ransomware attacks](#) targeting unpatched end-of-life SMA 100 series and Secure Remote Access products. However, CrowdStrike, Coveware security researchers, and CISA warned that [HelloKitty ransomware operators were already targeting SonicWall appliances](#).

[Over 500,000 business customers](#) from 215 countries are using SonicWall products worldwide, many of them deployed on the networks of government agencies and the world's largest companies.

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HEADLINE	01/25 Canada's foreign affairs ministry hacked
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/canadas-foreign-affairs-ministry-hacked-some-services-down/
GIST	<p>The Canadian government department for foreign and consular relations, Global Affairs Canada was hit by a cyberattack last week.</p> <p>While critical services remain accessible, access to some online services is currently not available, as government systems continue to recover from the attack.</p> <p>Global Affairs Canada systems face network disruption</p> <p>Global Affairs Canada (GAC) systems faced a network disruption after being hit with a cyberattack last week.</p> <p>GAC is the Canadian government department responsible for looking after the country's diplomatic and consular relations, international trade, and leading international development and humanitarian assistance programs.</p> <p>In a statement today, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat (TBS), Shared Services Canada, and Communications Security Establishment together confirmed that a cyber incident involving Global Affairs Canada took place, sometime last week.</p> <p>The attack was detected on January 19th, after which mitigation actions were taken.</p> <p>The Canadian government further states while critical services continue to be available via Global Affairs' online systems, "some access to internet and internet-based services" is not available as mitigation measures have been put in place and systems undergo recovery.</p> <p>There is no indication that any other government departments were impacted by the attack, explains the government.</p>

"There are systems and tools in place to monitor, detect, and investigate potential threats, and to take active measures to address and neutralize them when they occur," says TBS.

Attack comes amid Ukraine-Russia tensions

Official sources have not yet revealed what was the cause of the attack or who are the threat actors behind it, as the investigation continues.

The cyberattack against the Canadian government comes at a time when Russia-Ukraine tensions continue to escalate.

Equally interesting is the fact that the attack happened around the same time as the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security issued a [warning](#) to "critical infrastructure operators" to be aware of and take mitigatory actions against known Russia-backed cyber threats.

"This investigation is ongoing. We are unable to comment further on any specific details for operational reasons," says TBS.

"Our cyber defence and incident response teams work 24/7 to identify compromises and alert potential victims within the GC and Canadian critical infrastructure. The incident response team offers advice and support to contain the threat and mitigate any potential harm."

Earlier this month, multiple [Ukrainian government websites were defaced](#), including that of the country's foreign affairs ministry.

Some suspected threat actors to be Russian although website defacement acts aren't the typical attack method used by [a Russian state-sponsored hacking group like GRU](#).

While the threat actors behind the incident are yet to be revealed, this isn't the first time that attackers have successfully targeted Canadian government systems.

In November 2021, the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador was hit by a cyberattack causing [severe disruption to healthcare providers and hospitals](#).

In early 2021, [Canada Post suffered a data breach](#) due to ransomware attack against one of its third-party providers

Prior to that, hackers were able to [access 9,041 GCKey accounts](#) via the "credential stuffing" technique to steal tax relief payments from Canadians.

"We are constantly reviewing measures to protect Canadians and our critical infrastructure from electronic threats, hacking, and cyber espionage," concluded the TBS, while encouraging everyone to follow cybersecurity best practices.

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HEADLINE	01/24 Trickbot injections get harder to detect
SOURCE	https://www.darkreading.com/vulnerabilities-threats/trickbot-injections-get-harder-to-detect-analyze
GIST	<p>The authors of the Trickbot Trojan have added multiple layers of defenses around the malware to make it harder for defenders to detect and analyze the injections it uses during malicious operations.</p> <p>The improvements coincide with escalating activity around the malware and appear designed for attacks in which Trickbot is being used to conduct online banking fraud — something the tool was originally designed for before it was repurposed for malware distribution purposes.</p>

Researchers from IBM Trusteer analyzed the most recent code injections that Trickbot uses in the process of stealing information for conducting banking fraud. They discovered new tweaks to it of the type that the operators of the malware have been making since it was first released in 2016.

The updates include a new server-side injection mechanism; encrypted communications with the command-and-control (C2) server for fetching injections; an anti-debugging feature; and new ways to obfuscate and hide the inject code. Limor Kesseem, executive security adviser at IBM, describes the changes as part of an ongoing effort that Trickbot's developers have been putting into keeping the malware one step ahead of security researchers and detection tools.

"Malware that's designed to get through security controls, as Trickbot is, has to be constantly updated," Kesseem says. "Things change [at] the code level, resources are encoded/encrypted and obfuscated. These efforts are there to prevent detection and hinder analysis as much as possible."

Trickbot emerged not long after Russian law enforcement authorities arrested the operators of [Dyre](#), a banking Trojan that was used in attacks that ended up costing millions of dollars in losses for banks such as Chase and Bank of America. The highly modular tool started off as a banking Trojan like Dyre and is designed to steal information that would allow attackers to access and steal money from a victim's bank account. Over the years, Trickbot morphed also into a vehicle for distributing other malware, including ransomware and other banking Trojans, such as Emotet.

The operators of Trickbot have so far been largely impervious to takedown attempts. This includes one attempt in October 2020 in which researchers at Microsoft, ESET, and other security vendors worked with the Financial Services Information Sharing and Analysis Center to [disrupt Trickbot's C2 infrastructure](#). At the time, the malware had infected more than a million systems in 12 countries.

Though the takedown effort resulted in some 19 different Trickbot C2 servers at different locations being disconnected, it had only a [moderate impact](#) at best on the malware operation. Details from an indictment last year against a Latvian developer of the malware described the core Trickbot group as made up of some 20 individuals, including software developers, malware experts, money mules, and programmers.

Extra Protections

[IBM's analysis of the latest version of TrickBot](#) shows that the operators have added extra protections to code injections that are used in real time when a user with an infected machine might attempt to access their bank account online. The injections are designed to modify information going out from the user's browser on-the-fly before it reaches the bank's server.

One of the ways cybercriminals trick victims into divulging sensitive information is by using customized Web-injection flows that mimic what they would normally expect when interacting online with their bank, Kesseem says. "They can go all the way to creating a fake banking site on their servers and take victims there instead," she says. "In other cases, they create a more robust scheme that involves humans on the other end," as was the case with Dyre attackers.

IBM's analysis shows that instead of fetching injection code from configuration files stored locally on a compromised system, Trickbot's operators now have begun injecting the code in real time from their own server. This kind of server-side injection is easier for attackers to manipulate in real time than locally stored injections. They also make it much harder for defenders to understand what malicious activity might be launched against a particular target, IBM said.

A JavaScript downloader that Trickbot uses has also been tweaked so it now uses the HTTPS protocol to securely fetch Web injections from an attacker-controlled inject-server. The injections are tailored for specific bank URLs and are designed to trick users into divulging information the attackers can use to steal money from an online bank account.

	<p>As a further measure, Trickbot's authors have added an anti-debugging feature to the malware's JavaScript code. The debugging feature is designed to spot the so-called "code-beautifying" that security researchers do when analyzing suspicious code. When Trickbot's new anti-debugging mechanism detects any attempt at such code beautifying, it immediately triggers a process that results in memory getting overloaded and the browser crashing, IBM said.</p> <p>The code that Trickbot injects itself is also highly obfuscated. It is encoded with Base64 and uses a variety of tricks such as making code unreadable to the human eye or hiding information about code execution and representing numbers and variables in a deliberately complex way. "Knowing about the techniques helps defenders know what to expect," Kesseem says, "and to unpack the challenging parts so they can analyze the malware and adjust controls."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 WhisperGate wiper malware
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/researchers-break-down-whispergate-wiper-malware-used-in-ukraine-website-defacement/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The malware used to strike Ukrainian government websites has similarities to the NotPetya wiper but has more capabilities "designed to inflict additional damage," researchers say.</p> <p>Dubbed WhisperGate, the malware is a wiper that was used in cyberattacks against website domains owned by the country's government. The spate of attacks led to the defacement of at least 70 websites and a further 10 subject to "unauthorized interference," according to the Security Service of Ukraine, State Special Service and Cyber Police.</p> <p>The wave of attacks was made public on January 14. Websites impacted included the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Education and Science, and various state services.</p> <p>The defacement and reported compromise of at least two government systems come at a time when there appears to be a growing threat of invasion by Russia into Ukraine, despite the country denying any such plans. The UK has recently pulled a number of UK embassy staff out of Kyiv in response.</p> <p>Microsoft has published an analysis of WhisperGate, which was discovered on January 13. In a follow-up, Cisco Talos said it was likely that stolen credentials provided the access point for the deployment of the wiper.</p> <p>Cisco Talos says that two wipers are used in WhisperGate attacks. The first wiper attempts to destroy the master boot record (MBR) and to eradicate any recovery options.</p> <p>"Similar to the notorious NotPetya wiper that masqueraded as ransomware during its 2017 campaign, WhisperGate is not intended to be an actual ransom attempt, since the MBR is completely overwritten," the researchers say.</p> <p>However, with many modern systems now moving to GUID Partition Tables (GPTs), this executable may not be successful, so an additional wipe has been included in the attack chain.</p> <p>In the second stage, a downloader pulls the code required for the third step. After a base64-encoded PowerShell command is executed twice and an endpoint is requested to enter sleep mode for 20 seconds. A Discord server URL, hardcoded into the downloader, is then pinged to grab a .DLL file.</p> <p>The .DLL, written in C#, is obfuscated with the Eazfuscator, a .NET platform obfuscator and optimizer. The .DLL is a dropper that deploys and executes the main wiper payload through a VBScript. In addition, Windows Defender settings are tampered with to exclude the target drive from scans.</p> <p>"The fourth-stage wiper payload is probably a contingency plan if the first-stage wiper fails to clear the endpoint," Cisco Talos says.</p>

The wiper seeks out fixed and remote logical drives to target in the fourth stage. Enumeration then occurs, and files are wiped in drives outside of the "%HOMEDRIVE%\Windows" directory. Files with one of 192 extensions, including .HTML, .PPT, .JPG, .RAR, .SQL, and .KEY is destroyed.

"The wiper will overwrite the content of each file with 1MB worth of 0xCC bytes and rename them by appending each filename with a random four-byte extension," Talos says. "After the wiping process completes, it performs a delayed command execution using Ping to delete "InstallerUtil.exe" from the %TEMP% directory. Finally, it attempts to flush all file buffers to disk and stop all running processes (including itself) by calling ExitWindowsEx Windows API with EWX_SHUTDOWN flag."

Following the cyberattack, the European Union said it was mobilizing "all its resources" to assist Ukraine, NATO has pledged its support, and US President Biden [has warned](#) Russia of a cyber 'response' if Ukraine continues to be targeted.

CISA has [recommended](#) (.PDF) that organizations in general, as well as those linked to Ukraine, implement multi-factor authentication for remote systems, disable ports and access points that are not business-critical, and that strong controls be implemented for cloud services to mitigate the risk of compromise.

"We assess with medium confidence that stolen credentials were used in the attack based on our investigation thus far," Cisco Talos says. "We have high confidence that the actors had access to some victim networks in advance of the attacks, potentially for a few months or longer. This is a common trait of sophisticated APT attacks."

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HEADLINE	01/24 DHS: potential for Russia cyberattacks
SOURCE	https://www.zdnet.com/article/dhs-warns-critical-infrastructure-orgs-local-governments-of-potential-for-russian-cyberattack/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) sent out a bulletin on Sunday to critical infrastructure operators and local governments warning about the potential for cyberattacks launched by the Russian government. These attacks would be in response to any US involvement in a potential war in Ukraine.</p> <p>First reported by CNN, the notice said Russia "maintains a range of offensive cyber tools that it could employ against US networks --from low-level denials-of-service to destructive attacks targeting critical infrastructure."</p> <p>"We assess that Russia would consider initiating a cyber attack against the Homeland if it perceived a US or NATO response to a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine threatened its long-term national security," the bulletin said, according to ABC News.</p> <p>DHS added that it has not seen Russia launch cyberattacks against US critical infrastructure, "notwithstanding cyber espionage and potential prepositioning operations in the past."</p> <p>DHS sent the memo to state governments, local governments, and operators of critical infrastructure. A DHS spokesperson would not discuss the memo specifically but told ZDNet they regularly share information "with federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial officials and the private sector to ensure the safety and security of all communities across the country."</p> <p>"We have increased operational partnerships between private sector companies and the federal government to strengthen our nation's cyber defenses, including through CISA's newly established Joint Cyber Defense Collaborative (JCDC). The JCDC brings these partners together to help us understand the full threat landscape and enable real-time collaboration to empower our private sector partners to gain information and take action against the most significant threats to the nation," a DHS spokesperson said.</p>

CNN reported that in addition to the DHS memo, multiple government agencies have been in contact with private sector companies and organizations to issue similar warnings. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has published multiple advisories this year similarly warning of a Russian cyberattack following [multiple incidents in Ukraine](#) over the last two weeks.

CISA, which referred all questions about the most recent memo to DHS, [released](#) an alert on January 11 detailing a variety of tactics used by Russian state-sponsored groups to attack local and tribal governments across the US between September 2020 and December 2020.

The alert said Russian state-sponsored actors have targeted a variety of the US and international critical infrastructure organizations over the years and made specific references to [previously reported](#) attacks by Russian groups on critical infrastructure in Ukraine. A [US Homeland Security report](#) from 2016 said 225,000 customers were left without power two days before Christmas because of the Russian attack on three regional electric power distribution companies.

CISA then followed up that alert with [another warning](#) last week urging all US organizations to shore up defenses "now" in response to website defacements and destructive malware [targeting Ukraine government websites and IT systems](#).

CISA [recommended](#) that organizations implement multi-factor authentication for remote systems, disable ports and access points that are not business-critical, and put strong controls in place for cloud services.

Late last week, US President Joe Biden [threatened](#) reciprocal cyberattacks against Russia if it continued to attack Ukrainian systems.

Kevin Breen, director of cyber threat research at Immersive Labs, said the attacks last year on [Colonial Pipeline](#) and [food manufacturer JBS](#) were proof that cyberattacks could cause significant damage to everyday life.

"We've seen notable ransomware groups operating out of that region, including REvil and DarkSide, with the technical ability to compromise large networks rapidly and at great scale. It would be wrong to assume that the nation state housing such criminal elements doesn't have a matching capability," Breen said.

"In this fast-paced world of constant cyberattacks and zero-day exploits, it's always better to err on the side of caution. It's better to assume you are a target and have strategic plans in place to match that of the adversaries' capabilities," Breen added.

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HEADLINE	01/24 Red Cross hack victimizing most vulnerable
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/24/red-cross-hack-is-victimizing-most-vulnerable/
GIST	<p>A massive cyberattack targeting the International Committee for the Red Cross is showing how hacking can even threaten vital humanitarian work.</p> <p>The breach compromised the personal information of more than 500,000 recipients of Red Cross assistance, including victims of war and violence, the Red Cross said. The breached servers belong to the organization's Restoring Family Links service, which focuses on reconnecting loved ones separated by war and other causes.</p> <p>That raises the specter of those people being victimized again by hackers either stealing their online identities or sharing their information with groups that may wish them harm.</p> <p>"We are appealing to whomever is responsible: The real people, the real families behind the information you now have are among the world's least powerful," Director General of the International Committee of the Red Cross Robert Mardini said in a rare public appeal to the hackers to not do anything with their bounty.</p>

The damage

The hack forced the Red Cross to halt much of its work on behalf of separated families while the system that holds their data is offline. That's preventing the reunification of about a dozen people with their families per day, the organization said.

It's raising concerns that people in need of assistance may become more fearful of sharing their information with organizations designed to help them.

The hack has caused "immeasurable damage" to the notion any program can safely manage the personal information of so many victims of war and violence, **Lukasz Olejnik**, an independent cybersecurity researcher and former cyberwarfare adviser at the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, told me.

"This contributes to the debate and the big questions of whether some kind of data should really be run via open-access digital systems," he said.

It's also underscoring the damage hackers could cause by targeting humanitarian agencies more broadly — most of which have far fewer technical resources than the Red Cross.

"We talk a lot about the monetary damage of cyberattacks, but this really brings home that there is a tangible human toll to cyberattacks and intrusions that impact very vulnerable populations," **Chris Painter**, former top cyber diplomat during the Obama administration, told me.

How?

The breach itself is a bit of a mystery. Here's what we know so far, mostly from a lengthy Red Cross [statement](#):

- The Red Cross doesn't know who conducted the attack or whether it was a criminal group or nation state.
- The Red Cross described the attack as highly targeted and aimed at Red Cross servers rather than at the third-party company that was hosting those servers.
- The hackers haven't reached out to demand a ransom payment or for other reasons.
- In addition to data from separated people, the breach compromised login information for about 2,000 staff and volunteers.

The facts the attack was targeted and there has been no ransom demand suggests it may have come from a nation state or other group with political motives rather than criminal hackers just looking for a payoff.

Yet the database is mostly focused on people fleeing areas torn by war and violence rather than the sort of high-value political targets that would be most valued by hackers tied to national intelligence services.

"The potential value to a nation state is very unclear," Painter told me.

Humanitarian appeal

The Red Cross's plea to the hackers not to use the data is also novel. The Red Cross said in its statement that officials are "willing to communicate directly and confidentially with whoever may be responsible ... to impress upon them the need to respect our humanitarian action."

That plea could have some impact if the perpetrators are criminals. They may be eager to avoid the sort of negative publicity that could bring added attention from international law enforcement.

It's unlikely to do much good, however, if government hackers are responsible.

"If you're a nation state doing targeted operations to get information, you're going to use it," Painter told me. "That's why they do this."

HEADLINE	01/24 Hacking group: Belarusian railways hacked
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/01/25/belarus-railway-hacktivist-russia-ukraine-cyberattack/
GIST	<p>A group of pro-democracy hackers calling themselves “Cyber Partisans” said Monday they had infiltrated the Belarusian rail network in an effort to “disrupt” the movement of Russian troops into the country as tensions over a potential renewed invasion of Ukraine grow.</p> <p>The “hacktivists,” who announced the cyberattack in posts on Twitter and Telegram, said that they had encrypted some of the railroad’s “servers, databases and workstations” because it facilitates the movement of “occupying troops to enter our land.” The group said it would return the network to “normal mode” if 50 political prisoners in need of medical care were released and Russian military personnel were barred from Belarus.</p> <p>The Belarusian Defense Ministry said Monday that Russian troops were already arriving in the Kremlin-aligned country, which borders Ukraine and Russia, ahead of a February training operation. That exercise has raised fears in the West that it would place Russian troops and equipment along Ukraine’s northern border, near the capital, Kyiv, further encircling the country.</p> <p>As of early Tuesday, customers were not able to use parts of the Belarusian Railway website for booking tickets. An error message said the site “is temporarily unavailable, come back later.” Cyber Partisans said it did not intend to affect passenger service and was working to fix the problem, the Associated Press reported. A spokesperson for the group, which said it did not target security and automation systems so as to avoid creating an emergency, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>The Belarusian Foreign Ministry did not immediately return a request for comment. Franak Viacorka, an adviser to the exiled Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, told Bloomberg News that the hack was a “massive action” that “could paralyze the railroad infrastructure.”</p> <p>Cybersecurity experts said the hackers could keep their grip over the rail network indefinitely if Minsk did not maintain backup servers.</p> <p>“Critical infrastructure, in Belarus and around the world, represents something of a soft target for ransomware attacks,” said Andrew Reddie, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley’s School of Information. But he added that it was still too early for cybersecurity researchers to “definitively” confirm the attack.</p> <p>Zachary Peterson, a computer science professor at Cal Poly at San Luis Obispo, said railway networks, like other critical infrastructure, “are often legacy systems, built long before [cyber]security was a serious consideration.”</p> <p>“It was a natural step,” Peterson said, “for a hacktivist group to repurpose an attack ... created for financial extortion to a tool for political purposes.”</p> <p>Through a previous series of hacks over the past two years, Cyber Partisans, a set of self-taught hacktivists, gathered records that included tapped phone calls and internal documents that exposed government efforts in Belarus to crush dissent. The effort was among the most organized and sweeping hacks by opposition activists against a government, analysts said at the time.</p> <p>The group was “fairly well known and tied to pro-democracy protests” over the past couple of years in Belarus, Reddie said, noting that the use of ransomware to “coerce a government actor rather than pursue financial gain ... is fairly unique.”</p> <p>Minsk did not comment on the cyberattacks last year, but no Belarusian official has publicly challenged the authenticity of Cyber Partisans’ posts. At least one top Belarusian security official has acknowledged that opposition groups have waged hacking efforts.</p>

	<p>The conflict over Ukraine intensified Monday as NATO said it would move more military equipment into Eastern Europe and the Biden administration put 8,500 troops on alert for possible deployment to the region.</p> <p>The United States has ordered families of diplomats to evacuate Kyiv, and the State Department has encouraged American citizens to leave Ukraine. Britain has also asked some diplomats and their families to leave.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Concerns: China Winter Olympics app
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/24/should-athletes-be-worried-about-flaws-in-chinas-olympics-app
GIST	<p>With the Beijing Olympics just weeks away, concerns are mounting over a mandatory health app for competing athletes, after a new report revealed the app contains security flaws and a list of “politically sensitive” words that have been marked for censorship.</p> <p>The report, published by University of Toronto’s research and strategic policy unit Citizen Lab, found that the My2022 app, which will be used to monitor athletes’ health and travel data, has a “devastating” encryption flaw that leaves users’ files and media vulnerable.</p> <p>The problem, researchers say, is twofold: first, the app does not always verify that the servers where encrypted data is being sent are the intended servers, which could enable malicious actors to spoof or mimic that server’s identity to access those files. That could allow the attacker to, for instance, “read a victim’s sensitive demographic, passport, travel, and medical information sent in a customs health declaration or to send malicious instructions to a victim after completing a form”, the report said. Second, the app is not encrypting some sensitive data at all. Effectively, that means some sensitive data within the app, “including the names of messages’ senders and receivers and their user account identifiers”, is being transmitted without any security.</p> <p>“Such data can be read by any passive eavesdropper, such as someone in range of an unsecured wifi access point, someone operating a wifi hotspot, or an internet service provider or other telecommunications company,” the report reads.</p> <p>The Beijing Olympics are already taking place under a cloud of controversy. The US announced in December that it would stage a diplomatic boycott of the games over human rights concerns, as China continues to deny its years-long campaign against Uyghur minorities. US lawmakers have also proposed new legislation that would strip the International Olympics Committee’s (IOC) tax-exempt status over its refusal to challenge China on its human rights violations.</p> <p>The encryption flaws in the app have raised further concerns, but how worried should visiting countries and athletes be? Though experts say general concerns about surveillance during the Olympics and the app are warranted, the reality is the app’s security flaws are probably more a reflection of poor design rather than sinister intent to surveil. In other words, athletes and others visiting the country during the Olympics should be as careful as they normally would when visiting China.</p> <p>“The main thing that Citizen Lab has told us is that there is a substance behind our fears and concerns, but it’s also true that we have a tendency to demonize China,” said Jon Callas, the director of technology projects at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a non-profit digital right group.</p> <p>Callas and other experts say the Chinese government should certainly fix the security flaw, but that the flaw doesn’t necessarily open the athletes up to a higher risk of being surveilled by the government. And it’s not likely the encryption is faulty by design, said Kenton Thibaut, the resident China fellow of the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab. It’s unlikely anyone intentionally sabotaged the encryption of the app in order to more easily access user information, she pointed out, because all the information is going to the government anyway.</p>

“If you’re using Chinese apps, even if you’re not in China, they’ll still have access to the information that you submit because the data is ending up in a place where the government has control over and access to,” Thibaut said. “The app itself is made by a government entity, there would be no reason to do that.”

That said, the Olympics are a hugely important event for Beijing, Thibaut said, and it’s fair to expect a certain degree of monitoring, “especially for athletes who have perhaps indicated displeasure about not being able to speak out or displeasure about the IOC’s [stance](#) on China”.

Citizen Lab reported that there was a list of 2,422 political keywords described in the app’s codebase as “illegalwords.txt”. Though the function to censor these words did not appear to be active, the report said the keywords varied from references to pornography, mentions of the Tiananmen movement to some words in Uyghur including “the Holy Quran”, “injections”, and “forced demolitions”.

This is not unexpected, Callas said. “China does an awful lot of blocking of chat from absolutely everything and they throw their weight around in ways that are objectionable, with stuff like how much you can even mention that Taiwan exists,” he said. “They’re not going to allow free and unrestricted speech because they’re not that country.”

“When we agreed to let the Olympics happen in [Beijing](#), we agreed implicitly that these are some of the things that were going to happen,” he continued.

However, there are regular precautions that those traveling to China, during the Olympics or otherwise, should take, Callus said. National Olympic Committees around the world [have advised their teams](#) to leave their personal devices behind and take burner phones instead.

“It should be assumed that every text, email, online visit, and application access can be monitored or compromised,” the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee said in an advisory.

Callus said this should always be the case when traveling to China because all your personal information – from your contact list to your pictures – can be compromised.

“One reason for making sure you use a burner phone is your address book slash contacts list has sensitive information in it – in the sense that anybody who has your address book has, to some level of accuracy, your social graph and who you’re connected to,” he said. “What we learned from, for example, those Snowden drops nearly 10 years ago now, is that governments are far more interested to know who you are connected to and who you regularly talk to than what it is that you say.”

For athletes looking to communicate with their family or friends outside the country – particularly given families are not permitted to attend the Olympics due to Covid – Callus said they should use a “reasonably secure” encrypted messaging app, including iMessage, Signal or WhatsApp.

“If the Chinese [government] has not shut it down, it’s probably OK,” he said. “That’s probably the best way to talk to people back home.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 Lawsuit: Google secretly tracked people
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/technology/google-location-services-lawsuit.html?action=click&module=Well&pgtype=Homepage&section=Technology
GIST	<p>The District of Columbia and three states sued Google on Monday, claiming that the tech giant deceived consumers to gain access to their location data.</p> <p>In separate lawsuits, the attorneys general of the district, Texas, Washington and Indiana claimed that Google misled users of Android phones and of tools like Google Maps and its search engine by continuing to track location information of users who had changed privacy settings to prevent the data collection.</p>

Karl A. Racine, the attorney general for the District of Columbia, led the complaints after a three-year investigation, which was initiated after a [report by The Associated Press](#) showed that the company recorded users' movements even when told not to. He said investigators had found that since at least 2014, Google made misleading and conflicting claims to consumers about privacy protections offered via its account settings.

The District of Columbia lawsuit alleged that even after users changed the settings in their account or device to stop location tracking, Google collected and stored that information through Google services, Wi-Fi data and marketing partners. The search giant also misled and pressured users to enable more location tracking, for example by claiming products would not function properly if the location services setting was disabled when in fact it was not needed to use the app, according to the suit.

"Google falsely led consumers to believe that changing their account and device settings would allow customers to protect their privacy and control what personal data the company could access," Mr. Racine said in a statement. "The truth is that contrary to Google's representations it continues to systematically surveil customers and profit from customer data."

Google said that the allegations brought by the attorneys general were false and that it had put in place many changes to its privacy policies to help users protect their location data.

"The attorneys general are bringing a case based on inaccurate claims and outdated assertions about our settings," said Jose Castaneda, a spokesman for Google. "We have always built privacy features into our products and provided robust controls for location data. We will vigorously defend ourselves and set the record straight."

[Google is also fighting an antitrust lawsuit led by Texas](#) in which states have accused the company of obtaining and abusing a monopoly over the systems that allow publishers to auction off ad space to marketers. On Friday, Google asked a federal court to dismiss the lawsuit.

The lawsuits add to a mounting offensive by regulators to curtail the power and business practices of Silicon Valley giants like Google, Facebook, Amazon and Apple. State and federal regulators have filed dozens of antitrust, consumer protection, privacy and trade lawsuits in an attempt to curb the business models or break up the companies. A Senate committee last week advanced potentially landmark antitrust legislation that tries to weaken the dominance of the internet giants.

Mr. Racine and the attorneys general of Texas, Washington and Indiana said their suits, filed under local consumer protection laws, sought to fine Google and to stop its practice of collecting location data collection for users who have opted out. The attorneys general also have joined in other antitrust lawsuits against Google for allegedly harming competition in search and advertising technology.

"Google has prioritized profits over people," The Indiana attorney general, Todd Rokita, said. "It has prioritized financial earnings over following the law."

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HEADLINE	01/24 Cryptocurrency market loses \$130B 24hrs
SOURCE	https://www.cnbc.com/2022/01/24/bitcoin-ether-fall-as-130-billion-wiped-off-cryptocurrency-markets-.html
GIST	<p>The cryptocurrency market had around \$130 billion wiped off its value over the last 24 hours, as major digital coins continued their multi-day sell-off.</p> <p>On Monday bitcoin fell to as low as \$32,982.11, its lowest point since July, according to Coin Metrics. The largest cryptocurrency by market cap was last down 1.6% to \$34,623.20.</p> <p>Ether plunged to as low as \$2,176.41, its lowest since July, according to Coin Metrics. It last fell 6.3% to \$2,263.72. Both are about 50% off their respective all-time highs.</p>

Cryptocurrencies are moving in tandem with stocks, which have continued to fall since the beginning of the year and just came off of their [worst week since March 2020](#). Investors have been [selling risk assets like technology stocks](#), as they prepare for tighter monetary policy from the U.S. Federal Reserve.

“It’s possible that macro economic concerns, such as the Fed’s response to inflation rates, have facilitated more de-risking activity in general,” said Juthica Chou, head of OTC options trading at Kraken. “The recent price drop, coupled with high volatility, could be leading to further selling as participants look to reduce risk.”

Investors are also assessing the impact of further regulation on the cryptocurrency market. Last week, Russia’s central bank proposed [banning the use and mining of cryptocurrencies](#).

Given current market sentiment, bitcoin is likely to test the \$30,000-\$32,000 range, according to Vijay Ayyar, Luno’s vice president of corporate development and international expansion. If the cryptocurrency holds above \$30,000 for as much as one week, there could be a base formed at those levels before the market moves higher, he said. However, it could be some time for the market to turn bullish given the lack of confidence across the spectrum, he added.

Several other analysts have said they [see \\$30,000 as the next level of support](#) for the cryptocurrency to test. However, analyst John Roque of 22V Research said bitcoin could fall even further. He said he too has been using \$30,000 as a target but noted that the median historical bear market for bitcoin is down 78%. Bitcoin is currently about 50% off of its all-time high.

Investors are also grappling with rising inflation. Bitcoin proponents have long suggested the digital coin is a hedge against inflation, but that theory has not held up for many newer investors. As institutional interest poured into bitcoin last year, there are [more short-term investors in the crypto market](#) valuing bitcoin like a tech stock than ever before. [Analysts have said](#) there’s concern a more hawkish Fed could take the wind out of the crypto market’s sails.

“Looking forward, our most immediate concern is how equities markets respond to this week’s Fed meeting, especially after having just endured their worst week since the global onset of Covid,” said Leah Wald, CEO at digital asset investment manager Valkyrie Funds.

“A consolidation in stocks would lead to a risk-on environment where traders are more willing to take on additional risk assets such as bitcoin,” she added, “since digital assets have become increasingly correlated to equities as more companies continue to add bitcoin to their balance sheets. Volatility is likely to be a feature of bitcoin for at least the short-term, as traders figure out where market sentiment is following this week’s Fed meeting.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 REvil rebooted as ‘Ransom Cartel’?
SOURCE	https://www.databreachtoday.com/suspected-revil-ransomware-spinoff-ransom-cartel-debuts-a-18365
GIST	<p>Has the notorious REvil, aka Sodinokibi, ransomware operation rebooted as "Ransom Cartel"? Security experts say the new group has technical and other crossovers with REvil. But whether the new group is a spinoff of REvil, bought the tools, or is simply copying how they work, remains unclear.</p> <p>The anti-malware researchers behind MalwareHunterTeam note that the new crime group debuted by the middle of December 2021, and that while none of the group's crypto-locking malware has yet been recovered, and it's not clear how many victims the group might have amassed, it has a number of crossovers with REvil.</p> <p>These include the template used to generate ransom notes, the researchers say. But this would be easy to emulate.</p> <p>More difficult to emulate, however, are certain technical similarities. Files encrypted by Ransom Cartel's crypto-locking malware, for example, when viewed with a hex editor, have footers that "look" like files</p>

encrypted by REvil, even down to the placement of the checksum used to check for errors in a file, MalwareHunterTeam says.

"We can tell for sure that either someone spent a lot of time to study REvil and create a ransomware that has much similarities (why do this?) or this is REvil ransomware in some form (compiled from source or a sample of it got patched and reused again)," the researchers say.

Whether any former members of REvil are part of Ransom Cartel remains unknown.

What Happened to REvil's Leaders?

The [fate of REvil's leadership](#) also remains an open question, with core members such as [UNKN](#), aka "unknown," having disappeared from cybercrime forums they used to frequent.

REvil first appeared in April 2019 as a GandCrab ransomware spinoff, and the FBI says it went on to earn more than \$200 million in ransom payment profits.

The U.S. government in the spring of 2021 began sharing intelligence on ransomware groups with the Russian government, and demanding Moscow do more to blunt attacks emanating from inside the country.

On Jan. 14, Russia's Federal Security Agency, the FSB, announced that it had [arrested 14 suspected members](#) of the group. At least eight suspects have now been [charged with money control/laundering](#). At the time of the arrests, the FSB said it had been acting on U.S. intelligence.

So far, however, it's not clear if any of REvil's high-level leadership, whoever they might be, were arrested. At least some of the suspects appear to be affiliates. The White House, for example, said one of the suspects is an affiliate who also worked with the [DarkSide](#) group, and that the affiliate was responsible for the attack on U.S.-based Colonial Pipeline last May.

But [Vitali Kremez](#), CEO of threat intelligence firm Advanced Intelligence, says the actual coders behind REvil apparently weren't swept up in this month's arrests in Russia. "We have confirmation and knowledge of many REvil hackers still working with the other groups such as Conti," he says.

Rather, he says that the arrests appear to have snared mostly lower-level hackers or penetration testing experts - aka "pentesters" - who were "supporting/staffing affiliates' teams."

Partnering for Greater Profits

[Affiliates often work with multiple ransomware groups](#), serving as business partners or contractors. For groups such as REvil that largely ran as a ransomware-as-a-service - aka RaaS - operation, affiliates will execute most, if not all, of the actual attacks, meaning they infect victims with a group's ransomware. If a victim pays, the promise to an affiliate is often that they'll receive 70% of the payment, with operators keeping the rest.

The RaaS business model helped ransomware groups achieve record profits. This was thanks in part to the most successful operations - meaning the ones with the most robust ransomware executables, decryption tools, data leak portals, negotiation teams and more - often recruited the most skilled affiliates, including network-penetration experts, thus leading to higher profits for both affiliates and operators.

As these profits surged, however, groups were increasingly infecting or disrupting larger concerns, including organizations whose outages created national security concerns.

In May 2021, for example, Ireland's national health service was [infected with Conti ransomware](#), disrupting patient care for months. The same month, executives at Colonial Pipeline in the U.S. took their networks offline after being infected with DarkSide, leading to Americans panic-buying fuel. Attackers wielding REvil shortly thereafter hit the U.S. operations of the world's largest meat processor, JBS, and then software developer Kaseya, whose remote management tools are widely used by managed service providers. Attackers used those tools to distribute REvil onto endpoints managed by those MSPs, leading

to more than 1 million endpoints being infected, and over 1,000 different, affected organizations each receiving their own ransom demand. A [free decryptor](#) later got released.

International Crackdown

The White House responded by calling for an international crackdown on ransomware-wielding attackers and [anyone who enables them](#) and began devoting more resources to tracking, disrupting and prosecuting cybercrime.

The Biden administration, working with allies, also tasked law enforcement and military resources to [actively disrupt infrastructure](#) used by groups such as REvil, officials later revealed.

Full details of those operations have yet to be made public. But beyond REvil, security experts last summer noted that someone was targeting the LockBit 2.0 ransomware group and cybercrime marketplace Marketo with [distributed denial-of-service attacks](#).

[Interpol](#), meanwhile, has said that after the May 2021 hit on Ireland's [Health Service Executive](#) by Conti, it facilitated the "identification and takeover of the attackers' command-and-control server" in the Ukraine. Last October, the suspected REvil affiliate who hit Kaseya - Ukrainian national Yaroslav Vasinskyi, 22 - was [arrested in Poland](#). He's now the subject of a U.S. extradition request.

Last November, an indictment was unsealed [charging Russian national Yevgeniy Polyinin](#), 28, with perpetrating a 2019 REvil attack on IT service provider TSM Consulting Services, which led to [22 Texas municipalities being infected with REvil](#). While he remains at large, the Department of Justice said it had seized from him cryptocurrency worth \$6.1 million.

Mooting a REvil Reboot

Being disrupted by law enforcement agencies would help explain how REvil went dark last July, only to reappear - without explanation - last September. But whoever rebooted REvil apparently failed to correctly configure the operation's Tor-based sites, which allowed someone else - possibly a law enforcement agency - to take control of REvil's sites. Shortly thereafter, REvil went and has stayed dark.

"REvil as a brand is likely gone for good as affiliates and other threat actors would probably not want to collaborate with an operation that was reportedly compromised by law enforcement," Brett Callow, a threat analyst at security firm Emsisoft, told Information Security Media Group last October.

Meanwhile, reverse-engineering specialists working for the Exploit cybercrime forum, where REvil used to recruit, last year [published a teardown of REvil's code](#), and reported finding a [backdoor in all samples of REvil](#) up to July 2021 that would have allowed operators to cut an affiliate out of a deal, [Advanced Intelligence](#) reported last September.

All of that added up to REvil's reputation apparently having been [well and truly burned](#), as further suggested now by Advanced Intelligence reporting that some core REvil members are working with other groups.

Even so, Emsisoft's Callow has said that "it's not at all unlikely that they'll make a comeback under a new name."

This has already happened with DarkSide, which rebranded as BlackMatter. Time will tell if Ransom Cartel, however, can be counted as a new incarnation of REvil.

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Terror Conditions

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HEADLINE	01/24 Ex-BP chief: 14 terror watchlist at border
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SOURCE	https://denvergazette.com/news/nation-world/14-illegal-immigrants-on-terror-watchlist-stopped-at-border-in-2021-former-border-patrol-chief/article_69bf4be8-3898-5dd8-b4fa-add0217e8be8.html
GIST	<p>AUSTIN, Texas — Law enforcement intercepted 14 illegal immigrants at the U.S.-Mexico border who were on the terrorist watchlist, a former top official said, more than the four stops that the Department of Homeland Security had disclosed.</p> <p>U.S. Border Patrol agents stopped 14 noncitizens who were named on the terror watchlist and tried to sneak into the United States between October 2020 and August 2021, one month short of the entire fiscal year 2021, according to recently retired Border Patrol Chief Rodney Scott, who disclosed the number during a panel discussion at a Texas Public Policy Foundation conference in Austin this month and in a follow-up conversation with the <i>Washington Examiner</i>.</p> <p>The terror watchlist stops in 2021 are significant because they are higher than in previous years. U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the parent agency of the Border Patrol, declined to comment or release data on terror watchlist encounters.</p> <p>Last summer, Scott told agents in a farewell address that the agency was encountering people on the terror watchlist "at a level we have never seen before."</p> <p>The 14 people he referenced were identified as known or suspected terrorists, according to the Terrorism Screening Center's Terrorist Screening Database. The database lists people who have concrete affiliations with terrorist organizations and have carried out or plan to carry out terrorism, as well as people suspected of the same activities. The TSC is comprised of multiple federal agencies, while the terror watchlist is overseen by the FBI.</p> <p>The number of terror watchlist arrests by the Border Patrol is not published online, but individual arrests are normally shared through CBP's news releases on its website. CBP stopped disclosing them in 2021 and did not respond to a request for comment.</p> <p>House Republicans visiting the border in El Paso, Texas, in March 2021 said border authorities had told them that people on the terror watchlist "are now starting to exploit the southern border" as a result of the Biden administration's lax immigration policies.</p> <p>"People they've caught in the last few days [in Border Patrol's El Paso sector] have been under the terror watchlist," House Homeland Security Committee ranking member John Katko, a former federal prosecutor, said at the time. "Individuals that they have on the watchlist for terrorism are now starting to exploit the southern border."</p> <p>A CBP news release issued weeks later stated that two Yemeni men who were caught at the border were on the terror watchlist. CBP deleted the news release shortly after publishing it and said the information "was not properly reviewed" beforehand, a move Republicans said was a failure of transparency by the Biden administration.</p> <p>In addition to the terror watchlist, the government uses a separated category known as "special interest alien" to identify non-U.S. citizens it deems suspicious but has not determined to be affiliated with terrorist organizations. The DHS described the two as "not synonymous nor interchangeable."</p> <p>"Overall, we stop on average 10 individuals on the terrorist watchlist per day from traveling to or entering the United States — and more than 3,700 in Fiscal Year 2017," the DHS said in a statement issued in 2019. "Most of these individuals are trying to enter the U.S. by air, but we must also be focused on stopping those who try to get in by land."</p> <p>The surge of migrants from mostly Central American countries over the past year has prompted Border Patrol to pull approximately half of its 20,000 agents to transport, process, and care for people in custody, meaning fewer agents are in the field to prevent drug smuggling and criminals entering the U.S.</p>

	<p>Oftentimes, smugglers send over large groups of families and children to divert agents to one area and then run other contraband or people with criminal records across the border where agents are not present.</p> <p>Terrorism experts claimed in August that al Qaeda and Islamic State members could try to enter the U.S. illegally by way of the southern border following the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan in August 2021. Federal agents patrolling the 2,000-mile-long U.S.-Mexico border are increasingly on alert for foreigners on the terror watchlist, a senior CBP official who spoke on the condition of anonymity told the <i>Washington Examiner</i>.</p> <p>Any person in Border Patrol custody and flagged by the terror watchlist during background checks would be immediately transferred to and picked up by the FBI, said Scott, a distinguished senior fellow for border security at TPPF in Austin, Texas.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/25 RCMP preventive terror arrests: 2 minors
SOURCE	https://q107.com/news/8525552/rcmp-preventive-terrorism-arrests-ontario-quebec/
GIST	<p>Two minors have been arrested in Ontario and Quebec on allegations of terrorism, Global News has learned.</p> <p>In Toronto, a youth was arrested Jan. 14, on a preventive terrorism peace bond and appeared in court Thursday in a case allegedly related to the so-called Islamic State.</p> <p>Another youth was arrested on a terrorism peace bond Dec. 8, and was released on conditions following a court appearance in Terrebonne, Que., north of Montreal.</p> <p>Neither can be named because of their ages.</p> <p>There has been no indication the arrests were related, but they are the latest involving minors facing terrorism allegations.</p> <p>An RCMP spokesperson said the Toronto Integrated and National Security Enforcement Team (INSET) laid an Information 10 days ago “based on reasonable grounds to fear that a person may commit a terrorist offence.”</p> <p>“Given that the investigation is ongoing, and it involves a young person, we are not able to release further information at this time.”</p> <p>Meanwhile in Quebec, a judge “released the young person with numerous conditions and ordered the presence of the young person at the next court date,” a Public Prosecution Service of Canada spokesperson said.</p> <p>The next court date is March 28.</p> <p>Police have been using terrorism peace bonds to manage suspects they allege may commit terrorism offences. Conditions of the peace bonds generally include a ban on travel, curbs on internet use, and sometimes ankle bracelets.</p> <p>But suspects are not charged with terrorism offences.</p> <p>In addition to the two youths, the RCMP is currently seeking a peace bond against a woman who returned to Canada in November from a camp for ISIS detainees in Syria.</p> <p>Her lawyer said in court last Monday she was under investigation for war crimes and terrorism. She has not been charged.</p>

	<p>Two Ontario men, Kevin Omar Mohamed and Daniel Khoshnood, were also placed on terrorism peace bonds after police found Al Qaeda and bomb-making literature on their phones.</p> <p>Mohamed had just served a prison sentence for terrorism when he was caught in possession of extremist materials. He was seen meeting with Khoshnood, a violent offender also just out of prison.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Arizona teen juvenile detention: terrorism
SOURCE	https://www.knau.org/knau-and-arizona-news/2022-01-24/az-teen-on-fbi-terrorism-radar-sentenced-to-18-months-in-juvenile-detention-facility-for-making-pipe-bombs
GIST	<p>A 14-year-old boy suspected of building pipe bombs in his southern Arizona home will serve at least 18 months in a juvenile detention facility.</p> <p>The Sierra Vista Herald reported Monday that the teen pleaded guilty to one count each of promoting terrorism and possession of a prohibited weapon.</p> <p>The boy was arrested in May 2021 after authorities found a pipe bomb and preparation for a second in a back room of the Douglas home he shares with his mother and older brother.</p> <p>He was already on the FBI's radar because of terrorism-related social media posts.</p> <p>Prosecutors wanted him tried as an adult. His attorney argued his client should be tried as a juvenile because of his age and that he has autism.</p> <p>A deposition of his case indicates he will go to the Arizona Department of Juvenile Corrections. The teen won't stay there beyond his 18th birthday.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Militant Islamist violence surges in Sahel
SOURCE	https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mig2022-01-surge-militant-islamist-violence-sahel-dominates-africa-fight-extremists/
GIST	<p>Highlights</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A near doubling in violence linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel in 2021 (from 1,180 to 2,005 events) highlights the rapidly escalating security threat in this region. This spike was the most significant change in any of the theaters of militant Islamist group violence in Africa and overshadowed a 30-percent average decline of violent activity in the Lake Chad Basin, northern Mozambique, and North Africa regions. • Overall, militant Islamist group violence in Africa climbed 10 percent in 2021 setting a record of over 5,500 reported events linked to these groups. This continues an upward pattern seen since 2016. Nevertheless, the annual rate of increase was much less than the 43-percent increase reported in 2020. • Africa-wide, reported fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups dropped by 7 percent in 2021 over the previous year, to an estimated 12,700 deaths. This includes a 14-percent decline in fatalities linked to violence against civilians, revealing a decrease in every theater except the Sahel. • Incidents of battles involving militant Islamist groups and both state and nonstate armed forces comprised 52 percent of all reported violent events in 2021. This reflects significant escalations in battles in northern Mozambique, Somalia, and the Sahel, continuing a trend from the past several years. • Militant Islamist violence in Africa remains largely concentrated in five theaters, each comprising distinct locally based actors and context-specific challenges: the Sahel, Somalia, the Lake Chad Basin, Mozambique, and North Africa. <p>Sahel</p>

- The 2,005 violent events observed in the Sahel (specifically Burkina Faso, Mali, and western Niger) in 2021 represent a 70-percent increase over the previous year. This continues an uninterrupted escalation of violence involving militant Islamist groups in the region since 2015. While having originated and still largely centered in Mali, the propensity of militant Islamist violence has now shifted to Burkina Faso, which accounts for 58 percent of all events in the Sahel.
- Two groups, the [Macina Liberation Front \(FLM\)](#) and the [Islamic State of the Greater Sahara](#) (ISGS), account for the majority of these violent attacks. FLM is part of a consortium of groups with ties to al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb known as [Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin \(JNIM\)](#).
- The estimated 4,839 fatalities linked to these violent events in the Sahel in 2021 were 17 percent higher than the previous year. This follows a 57-percent increase reported in 2020. There are now more fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups in the Sahel than any other region in Africa.
- Reported attacks on civilians (833) and related fatalities (1,332) in the Sahel roughly doubled from 2020. Militant Islamist group violence against civilians in the Sahel represents 60 percent of all such violence in Africa.
- An observable consequence of such violence in the Sahel is the displacement of more than 2.4 million people, including more than 190,000 refugees and 2.2 million internally displaced. Burkina Faso accounts for the bulk of this displacement, with roughly 1.6 million displaced.
- Battles between security forces and militant Islamist groups also increased over the last year—but varied greatly by group. Battles with JNIM groups increased by 50 percent, while engagements with ISGS saw a 45-percent decrease.

Somalia

- There was a 17-percent increase in violent activity involving al Shabaab over the past year (from 1,771 reported events to 2,072) marking a steady increase—and near doubling—from the 1,080 events in 2015.
- The Somali theater accounts for 38 percent of all militant Islamist group events in Africa, roughly equivalent to the level of the Sahel. Despite consistent increases in militant Islamist violence in Somalia over the years, this represents a decline from al Shabaab's involvement in approximately half of all militant Islamist violence observed in Africa over much of the last decade—reflecting the escalating violence in other theaters, particularly the Sahel.
- Almost three-quarters of the events linked to al Shabaab in 2021 were in the form of battles between al Shabaab and security forces. Battles escalated 32 percent in 2021, while attacks on civilians dropped 27 percent. Al Shabaab continues to try to leverage the political crises surrounding the [delayed legislative and presidential elections](#) to expand its influence.

Lake Chad

- The 843 violent events observed in the Lake Chad Basin (straddling four countries: [Nigeria](#), [Cameroon](#), [Chad](#), and southeastern Niger) in 2021 represent a 32-percent decrease in militant Islamist activity from the previous year. This reflects a notable turnabout from the upsurge in violence in 2020, though still corresponds to roughly 10 percent more incidents than in 2019.
- The Lake Chad Basin also experienced a 21-percent drop in reported annual fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups. Boko Haram saw the largest drop (46 percent) while its offshoot, the Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA), observed just a 3-percent dip. This may have been due to the major transitions each group underwent in 2021, not the least of which included the death of Boko Haram's longtime leader, Abubakar Shekau, in May.
- Boko Haram and ISWA violence against civilians dropped by 49 percent in 2021. This was mirrored by similar declines in remote violence, such as IED's and shellings, (33 percent) and battles (18 percent).
- The upsurge in violence in northwest Nigeria is largely attributed to [organized criminal gangs](#) rather than militant Islamist groups.

Northern Mozambique

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The number of reported violent incidents linked to militant Islamist groups in the Cabo Delgado Province of northern Mozambique dropped 25 percent in 2021 to 329—a dramatic change from the 129-percent increase reported in 2020. • For the first time since the insurgency began at the end of 2017, northeastern Mozambique saw more battles (56 percent) than violence against civilians (38 percent) in 2021. Attacks on civilians in 2021 dropped by 58 percent over the prior year. • The reported 1,067 fatalities in 2021 (of which 66 percent were associated with battles) mark a 33-percent drop from previous year. Fatalities linked to violence against civilians declined by 60 percent. These falloffs in reported fatalities correspond with the deployment of troops from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Rwanda. <p>North Africa</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 234 violent events involving ISIS in North Africa in 2021 represent a continuing 5-year decline in incidents from its high point when there were 506 violent episodes linked to ISIS. Virtually all the reported activity in 2021 was in Egypt (about 95 percent). The 272 fatalities linked to these events represent a 52-percent drop from 2020—and a 14-fold decline from the over 4,000 fatalities experienced in 2015. • The Egyptian theater is characterized by the longstanding conflict between the Egyptian military and militant Islamist groups mostly in the Sinai. In 2021, remote violence accounted for 55 percent of violent events and 45 percent of fatalities reported in the theater, while battles accounted for 35 percent of events and 45 percent of deaths.
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HEADLINE	01/24 Florida man jailed 15yrs: terror support
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/counterterrorism/15-year-sentence-for-florida-resident-who-attempted-to-provide-ied-information-to-isis/
GIST	<p>U.S. District Judge Jose E. Martinez has sentenced 29-year-old Samuel Baptiste to 15 years in federal prison for attempting to materially support terrorism. The judge ordered that the sentence run consecutive to the 80-month sentence that Baptiste is currently serving for being a felon in possession of a firearm.</p> <p>According to court documents, in November 2016, Baptiste provided information on constructing explosive devices to persons he believed were acting on behalf of ISIS. He shared the information by posting it on internet links and portions of a munitions manual.</p> <p>On October 22, 2021, Baptiste admitted his conduct and pled guilty to violating 18 U.S.C. 2339A.</p> <p>Juan Antonio Gonzalez, United States Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, and George L. Piro, Special Agent in Charge, FBI Miami, announced the sentence.</p> <p>FBI Miami investigated the case. The case is being prosecuted by Assistant U.S. Attorneys Marc S. Anton and Michael Thakur.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 ISIS: hundreds of militants freed in jailbreak
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/epxa4k/isis-claims-it-freed-hundreds-of-militants-in-syria-jailbreak
GIST	<p>ISIS revealed that its militants smashed open a prison holding thousands of jihadists by repeatedly reversing a pickup truck into the complex's walls before releasing hundreds of its men.</p> <p>The jailbreak marks the biggest incident in northeastern Syria since the fall of ISIS's so-called caliphate three years ago. 102 ISIS members, 45 members of the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, and 7 civilians are reported to have died in the clashes, according to the London based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.</p>

ISIS released a video showing their men breaking into the prison in the Ghwayran neighbourhood in Hasakah on its Amaq news channel on Telegram on Saturday.

ISIS's propaganda machine claimed that the group has freed over 800 jihadis, and killed more than 200 SDF fighters in the clashes.

The footage showed a pickup truck reversing and smashing into the concrete wall, breaking into a section on the south side of the prison complex.

The militants could be heard crying "Allahu Akbar" with every blow.

Vehicles used by the SDF burst into flames, and images from the scene show smoke billowing above the compound.

The clashes between the SDF and ISIS militants have been ongoing since Thursday night, and the US-led coalition forces in the country have provided air cover and carried out a strike on the prison compound.

The SDF released statements on Sunday saying that an ISIS militant initially attacked the compound by blowing up a vehicle, before setting the prison's petrol supply on fire and taking the prison's catering staff hostage.

The ISIS video, which runs for around two minutes, shows the chaos inside the prison, where masked ISIS members opened up to the cells. It also shows a pile of dead bodies that the militants claim are SDF guards killed in riots inside the prison.

According to the statements released by the SDF, the attack was carried out by 200 ISIS fighters, who planned the raid for over six months. In the chaos, the militants also managed to seize the prison's weapons cache.

On Monday, the SDF announced that their security forces had managed to enter the prison complex, but there are thousands stuck inside, including 700 minors described as "ISIS cubs" - a term used for children of ISIS fighters held in a separate section of the jail.

The Kurdish forces have claimed that ISIS militants are using the minors as a "human shield" in the face of their advance to take back control of the compound.

Several similar videos taken from the surrounding of the prison complex showed a coordinated attack on the prison.

The SDF has claimed that their security forces have recaptured over a hundred ISIS militants, including foreign nationals, with few still on the run. The prison holds nearly 3,500 suspected ISIS members.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, some 300-400 ISIS fighters managed to flee the prison, but the Kurdish forces have yet to confirm the number of escapees.

The intense clashes have forced locals who live near the jail to flee the mayhem that unfolded. Around 4,000 people have left their homes, and a seven-day curfew was announced by the Kurdish authorities on Monday.

The Kurdish-led administration has repeatedly urged Western countries to take back their ISIS-supporting nationals detained in Syria, saying it does not have the resources to guard such a large number of dangerous inmates.

The US State Department released a statement on Saturday echoing that message, saying the attack "underscores the urgent need for countries of origin to repatriate, rehabilitate, reintegrate, and prosecute, where appropriate, their nationals detained in northeast Syria."

HEADLINE	01/24 FBI role, informants muddle Mich. trial
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/us/whitmer-kidnapping-trial.html
GIST	<p>On a rainy night in northern Michigan in September 2020, a group of armed men divided among three cars surveyed the landscape around the vacation cottage of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, considering how to kidnap her as payback for her Covid-19 lockdown measures.</p> <p>Two men descended from the lead car to inspect a bridge on Route 31 in nearby Elk Rapids, assessing what was needed to blow it up to delay any police response to the house on nearby Birch Lake.</p> <p>Later, after team members returned to the rural camp where they had already conducted military-style training exercises, a man identified as “Big Dan” in government documents asked the assembled group, “Everybody down with what’s going on?” Another man responded, “If you are not down with the thought of kidnapping, don’t sit here.”</p> <p>Of the dozen men on that nighttime surveillance mission, four of them including “Big Dan” were either government informants or undercover F.B.I. agents, according to court documents.</p> <p>The events of that night will be a key element when, on March 8, five men charged with plotting to abduct the Democratic governor from her vacation cottage will go on trial in U.S. District Court in Grand Rapids, Mich.</p> <p>The trial is being closely watched as one of the most significant recent domestic terrorism cases, a test of Washington’s commitment in the wake of the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol to pursue far-right groups who seek to kindle a violent, anti-government insurgency or even a new civil war.</p> <p>The effort to prosecute the kidnapping plot, which BuzzFeed has extensively reported on, is sprawling. Both the prosecution and the defense are relying heavily on more than 1,000 hours of conversations and other events secretly recorded by informants or undercover agents. The defense lawyers want the case thrown out on entrapment grounds, accusing investigators of “egregious overreaching” by manipulating the accused men to drive the plot forward. Prosecutors will attempt to prove that the suspects were inclined toward the violence from the start.</p> <p>In another challenge for the case, prosecutors have made an unusual decision not to call to the witness stand three F.B.I. agents with high-profile roles in the investigation. One agent was fired last summer after being charged with domestic violence. Another agent, while supervising “Big Dan,” tried to build a private security consulting firm based in part on some of his work for the F.B.I. Some of the information about that agent became part of the defense arguments.</p> <p>All 14 suspects arrested in October 2020 were members of the Wolverine Watchmen or other armed, paramilitary groups. One of the six facing a federal kidnapping conspiracy charge pleaded guilty and is expected to testify against the rest. The other eight, who participated in some military-style training, were accused in two separate, ongoing state cases on a lesser charge of providing material support for terrorism.</p> <p>In recent weeks, the already complicated case has become more entangled, with the two sides arguing over what evidence can be presented in federal court.</p> <p>The informant known as “Big Dan” or “Confidential Human Source-2” in government papers will be the star witness for the prosecution. Descriptions of Dan’s interactions with the suspects are rife throughout the court documents, and he already testified extensively in one state case last year.</p> <p>Around March 2020, Dan, a veteran in his mid-30s who was wounded in the Iraq war, was working at the post office, looking online for ways to practice his military skills, according to the court documents,</p>

when the Wolverine Watchmen's Facebook page popped up. Members were adherents of the so-called [boogaloo movement](#) who seek to speed a societal collapse.

Alarmed by their discussions about targeting law enforcement officers, Dan reported them to the local police and eventually agreed to become an F.B.I. informant, he said in state court. He was paid about \$54,000 over the course of the roughly six-month investigation.

He was not alone. The F.B.I. deployed at least 12 informants, as well as several undercover agents, according to defense filings. On the nighttime surveillance operation of the governor's cottage, for example, the defense described "Big Dan" as the main organizer. Stephen Robeson, with a long history of both past crimes and work as an informant, was there too. The "explosives expert" who could topple the bridge was actually an undercover F.B.I. agent, as was a man in another vehicle.

The defense lawyers using that same trove of evidence material have built an entirely different scenario of what happened. They depict the accused as reluctant puppets entrapped by the F.B.I. agents and informants whom they say came up with the kidnapping plot.

Within weeks of joining, Dan took over the training exercises, introducing a much higher level of military tactics, defense lawyers said. They describe him as consulting closely with his main handler, Agent Jayson Chambers, on matters like who should participate in two surveillance trips to Ms. Whitmer's cottage.

The suspects discussing violence on the recordings or in encrypted chats was just inflammatory rhetoric, the defense says. Prosecutors say Adam Fox, 38, the group's ringleader, was living in the basement of a friend's vacuum cleaner shop where he worked, talking about assaulting the Michigan statehouse just as "Big Dan" was getting involved.

The defense lawyers in the federal case either declined or ignored requests to comment, while a spokesman for the U.S. attorney in Western Michigan said the office would not discuss pending criminal matters. The F.B.I. referred questions to the U.S. attorney.

Sting operations using informants are a thorny tactic in terror cases. In those developed after the Sept. 11 attacks, F.B.I. agents often got involved when someone expressed interest in joining Al Qaeda or in fomenting some kind of terrorist act. If the suspects had trouble agreeing on a plot or acquiring weapons, the informants or undercover agents would sometimes help them as a way of gauging criminal intent.

Critics of such F.B.I. methods like Michael German, a former undercover F.B.I. agent, accuse the agency of acting like Cecil B. DeMille, manufacturing complicated, theatrical scenarios rather than pursuing the more complex task of unearthing actual extremist plots.

Mr. German, who is now a fellow at the Liberty & National Security Program of the Brennan Center for Justice, said, "Rather than focus on those crimes and investigating them, there appears to be more interest in this method of manufacturing plots for the F.B.I. to solve."

Prosecutors argue that they remove real threats. Nils R. Kessler, the assistant U.S. attorney prosecuting the kidnapping suspects, has drawn parallels between their plans and the Jan. 6 attack. "As the Capitol riots demonstrated, an inchoate conspiracy can turn into a grave substantive offense on short notice," he wrote.

Still, prosecutors have sought to distance themselves from Mr. Robeson, 58, another pivotal F.B.I. informant. A paving contractor from Wisconsin and the leader of a paramilitary group, he pleaded guilty in October to federal charges of possessing a high-powered sniper rifle, illegal for a felon. His list of felonies and other crimes dating back to the 1980s included forgery, jumping bail and battery.

Mr. Robeson organized a meeting in Dublin, Ohio, in June 2020 involving members of armed paramilitary groups from half a dozen states as far away as Virginia and Missouri. He also hosted a field training exercise in Wisconsin in July and helped to survey the governor's cottage. He received nearly \$20,000.

In an extraordinary filing in early January seeking to bar recorded statements by Mr. Robeson from the trial, prosecutors called him a "double agent" who had worked "against the interests of the government." He attempted to get evidence destroyed and offered the defendants funds from a charity to buy weapons, among other acts, they said.

His lawyer, Joseph Bugni, declined to comment.

The entrapment defense has not been uncommon in terrorism cases after Sept. 11, but is one that juries have not embraced.

"It is a really hard defense. You are saying my client did it, but you should not punish him anyway because it wasn't fair, somebody manipulated him into it," said Jesse J. Norris, an associate professor of criminal justice at the State University of New York at Fredonia.

Federal law on entrapment boils down to two issues: whether the suspect was induced to commit the crime, and to what extent he was predisposed toward it. The latter is a gray area, because prosecutors can use almost any conversation referring to violence as proof, legal experts said. The three defendants in one state case are also seeking to have it dismissed on entrapment grounds.

Defense lawyers in the federal case say in court papers that it was Mr. Robeson, an informant, who broached the kidnapping idea at the Ohio meeting, where four of the 15 militia representatives were informants.

The prosecution holds that two of the men charged, Mr. Fox and Barry Croft, first proposed the idea. In denying Mr. Croft bail, a judge quoted him from a recording made at the Ohio meeting. In a conversation that included threats of hurting people, Mr. Croft said, "I'm going to do some of the most nasty, disgusting things that you have ever read about in the history of your life."

Mr. Croft is among several of the accused who also face federal weapons charges for exploding a homemade bomb.

When the trial begins, the prosecution will have to build its case without some of the F.B.I. agents who were central to the investigation.

After the suspects were arrested, Agent Robert J. Trask II was the main government witness, taking the stand during the first court hearings to describe the entire scenario.

The F.B.I. fired him in July after he was arrested and charged with beating his wife during an argument over an orgy that the two had attended at a hotel in Kalamazoo, Mich. In pleading no contest last December, Mr. Trask said he could not remember that night.

Two other F.B.I. agents have prompted objections from defense lawyers.

Defense lawyers accused Mr. Chambers of trying to leverage his role in the case to help build a private security consulting firm that he eventually disbanded in October 2021. As evidence of the significance of his role, they noted that Mr. Chambers wrote 227 reports about his exchanges with "Big Dan." Prosecutors said the defendants failed to prove that Mr. Chambers had a financial stake in the case's outcome.

Defense lawyers in both the federal and state cases have raised questions in court about Henrik Impola, Dan's other handler, who has testified in court in the investigation. A lawyer in a separate federal case

had complained to the F.B.I. that Mr. Impola had committed perjury, they said. Federal prosecutors in the Whitmer case called the accusation “unfounded,” noting that the court in that case made no finding of misconduct against Mr. Impola.

Nonetheless, the government announced in court papers last month that it would not be calling any of the three men to testify, and sought to bar mention of the incidents, saying that they “carry a high risk of unfair prejudice, confusion and misleading the jury.” It has endeavored to downplay the significance of the three men, noting that dozens of agents worked on the investigation.

Even if it is impossible to fully assess a case before the trial reveals all the facts, said Mr. German, the former undercover F.B.I. agent, the revelations thus far have encumbered the prosecution’s task. “There is certainly a lot of lumber that this case seems to have given defense attorneys to build a story about what happened,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/24 US helps thwart attack against UAE base
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/world/middleeast/us-air-force-uae-attack.html
GIST	<p>The U.S. military intervened on Monday to help the United Arab Emirates thwart a missile attack by rebels in Yemen on an air base where about 2,000 American personnel are stationed, U.S. and Emirati officials said.</p> <p>The attack marked a sharp escalation in tensions as it was the second in a week aimed at the United Arab Emirates, which is part of the Saudi-led coalition that has been at war with the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen for years. Though the Houthis frequently target Saudi Arabia, which borders Yemen, strikes aimed at the Emirates had been rare until recently, as have American interventions like the one on Monday, and the country has been considered a safe haven in a tumultuous region.</p> <p>The rebels said that they had targeted Al Dhafra Air Base in the capital, Abu Dhabi, which hosts the U.S. Air Force’s 380th Air Expeditionary Wing and has about 2,000 U.S. military and civilian personnel stationed there. The U.S. deployed Patriot missile defenses at the base.</p> <p>“U.S. forces at Al Dhafra Air Base, near Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), engaged two inbound missile threats with multiple Patriot interceptors coincident to efforts by the armed forces of the U.A.E.,” said Capt. Bill Urban, chief spokesman for the U.S. Central Command. “The combined efforts successfully prevented both missiles from impacting the base,” it added. American and Emirati officials said there were no casualties.</p> <p>The Emirati Ministry of Defense said the two missiles were fired by the Houthis.</p> <p>American forces on the base were on a heightened state of alert and spent about an hour in security bunkers after the missile alert sounded, said Lt. Col. Phillip Ventura, a spokesman for the U.S. Air Forces in the Middle East.</p> <p>“U.S. forces at Al Dhafra stand with the U.A.E. and our coalition partners across the region,” said Brig. Gen. Andrew Clark, commander of the 380th Air Expeditionary Wing. “We have a strong partnership with the Emiratis and will continue working together in support of our mutual interests.”</p> <p>Emirati authorities said missile fragments had fallen around Abu Dhabi but caused no casualties. The Emirati defense ministry affirmed its “full readiness to deal with any threats,” and promised to take all necessary measures to protect the state from attacks, according to the state news agency, WAM.</p> <p>The missile fire came a week after the Houthis claimed responsibility for another attack on the Emirates targeting the airport in Abu Dhabi and a fuel depot. That attack on the fuel depot killed three people.</p>

The Saudi-led coalition retaliated with airstrikes on northern Yemen, killing scores of people at a detention center and knocking out the internet across the impoverished country. The Houthis had threatened to avenge those strikes and to attack the United Arab Emirates again.

In a video statement, a Houthi military spokesman, Yahya Sarea, said the Houthis had carried out the attack in response to an escalation by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and that it had also included drones and missile attacks targeting sites in Dubai, another Emirati city, and Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Sarea warned foreign companies and investors in the Emirates to leave “since it has become an unsafe country that will be targeted regularly as long as it continues its aggression and siege of the Yemeni people.”

The escalation in hostilities is fresh proof of the Yemen conflict’s obstinacy a year after President Biden took office vowing to bring the war — and one of the world’s worst humanitarian disasters — to an end.

After months of territorial gains by the Houthis, who control northern Yemen, forces backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have managed to claw back some territory and shift the momentum of the war. Those offensives have snarled international efforts to push the two sides toward peace.

Even though the attack was successfully thwarted, it threatened to shake the image of the U.A.E. as a stable outpost in the chaotic Middle East.

“We have to be honest that this is something that we are not used to,” said Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a Dubai-based political scientist. “The U.A.E. has maintained a reputation of being a safe haven for investors, visitors and tourists,” he added, predicting that the attacks would not do lasting damage to that image.

“Maybe today, there is this attack,” he said. But the wealthy U.A.E. “has the best defense system that money can buy.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 Afghan women defy Taliban: protests
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/world/asia/afghan-women-taliban-protests.html
GIST	<p>KABUL, Afghanistan — On a raw January morning, Khujasta Elham trudged through a snowstorm to sign her name on a government register.</p> <p>Before the Taliban seized power in August, Ms. Elham was director of women’s programs for Afghanistan’s Civil Service Commission. But she and most other female government workers were prevented from returning to work by the Taliban’s new Islamic Emirate.</p> <p>Now Ms. Elham, who says she has not been paid since August, is required to sign in at her old job site once a month — a fiction that allows the Taliban to deny that they have fired female government workers. The grim routine also diminishes any hope for Ms. Elham that she will one day return to work.</p> <p>The dismissal of female workers is one of many indignities that have prompted small bands of women like Ms. Elham to take to the streets in protest, risking beatings or arrest. Taliban gunmen have pointed weapons at the demonstrators, sprayed them with pepper spray and called them “whores” and “puppets of the West,” Human Rights Watch said. Bearing placards and raising their fists, the women have resisted persistent attempts to erase them from public life.</p> <p>The protests rarely last for long. Taliban enforcers have roughed up women, beaten them and sprayed them with chemical irritants, activists say. Ms. Elham and others say they have received threatening phone calls from intelligence officers, warning them to stay silent or face unspecified “consequences.”</p> <p>“He asked me if I knew they had prisons for people like me,” Ms. Elham said of a Taliban intelligence officer who ordered her to end the demonstrations she has helped to organize.</p>

As the Taliban continue to demand humanitarian aid and diplomatic recognition, the United States and other countries and international bodies have insisted that Afghanistan's new rulers roll back their limits on women's rights. The issue is a main point of discussion this week as Taliban delegates have begun meeting with international officials in Oslo, Norway.

Among the most dramatic consequences of the Taliban takeover has been the swift reversal of gains made by women for two decades following the U.S.-led invasion that toppled the previous Taliban government in 2001. Women attended schools and universities and served in Parliament and government. They served in the army, the police force and as [lawyers and judges](#).

Women once made up at least a quarter of the government work force. But the Taliban have allowed only a handful of female medical workers and educators to retain their government jobs.

Most Afghan girls above the sixth grade [have not attended school](#) since August. In September, the Taliban converted the Ministry of Women's Affairs building into offices for the religious morality police. Last month, the Taliban banned [women from taking long journeys](#) without a male relative and from using public transport without a hijab, a type of head scarf.

The Taliban have also targeted activists protesting the restrictions. To avoid arrest, Ms. Elham and other demonstrators say they rotate among safe houses and communicate only by encrypted phone apps.

Rokhshana Rezai, 27, a prominent activist, said she once dressed as a man to pass through Taliban checkpoints after receiving threatening calls from Taliban officials. But she has continued to attend protests. Video from one recent demonstration shows her defiantly pulling away from a Talib who had grabbed her arm and tried to drag her away.

"We are getting more afraid," Ms. Rezai said. "They are not going to respect our rights and dignity."

Taliban officials have said that prior approval was required to hold a protest. But when the women have requested permission, Ms. Rezai said, "They don't allow it, and they never will."

On Jan. 19, three days after women protested the hijab directive, two activists were taken at gunpoint from homes in Kabul, said Zarifa Yaqoobi, 28, a leader of a group called the Afghan Powerful Women's Movement. Ms. Yaqoobi said the women's family members told her the women were taken away at night by armed men.

Ms. Yaqoobi said family members identified the activists as Tamana Zaryab Paryani and Parwana Ebrahim Khel. She said three of Ms. Paryani's sisters also disappeared. The New York Times attempted to speak to the families directly without success.

A video posted on social media shows Ms. Paryani screaming for help and shouting that the Taliban were pounding on her door. The Taliban have publicly denied any involvement in the detainment of Ms. Paryani and others.

Qari Saeed Khosty, a Ministry of Interior spokesman, said that Ms. Paryani's video had been fabricated "to create a case" intended to attract international attention.

"They are liars, and I don't want to talk about it," said Gen. Mubeen Khan, a police spokesman in Kabul, said of media reports about the disappearances. In a follow-up call, he told The Times: "Anyone who disrupts the public must be arrested. An order has gone to all security forces to arrest them and bring them to justice."

The crackdown on women's demonstrations in Afghanistan has raised concerns among human rights organizations.

Human Rights Watch said it represented “an [alarming and unlawful](#) escalation of efforts to suppress peaceful protest and free speech in Afghanistan.” The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan has called on the Taliban to [provide information](#) about the missing women.

Women’s rights activists and human rights groups have also called on the Taliban to provide information about the disappearance of Alia Azizi, a prison official in the western city of Herat. Ms. Azizi never returned home from work on Oct. 2.

Heather Barr, associate director of women’s rights at Human Rights Watch, said “the extremely muted response” from the international community coupled with the crackdowns on the Afghan news media had emboldened the Taliban.

“This is a sign that the Taliban feel these protests now need to be entirely stopped, whatever level of brutality that takes,” she said.

The disappearance of the two female activists was raised by an activist from Afghanistan at a conference that opened in Oslo on Sunday among the Taliban, and representatives from the United States and European nations, The Associated Press reported.

For the Taliban, the conference offers a platform to present their new Islamic Emirate as less oppressive than the Taliban government of the 1990s. For the United States and European nations, the meeting provides an opportunity to confront Taliban leaders face-to-face to demand improved human rights, an inclusive government, women’s rights and other reforms.

Afghans critical of the conference have protested outside the foreign ministry in Oslo, saying the Taliban should not be awarded an international platform.

On Jan. 23, Monisa Mubariz, co-founder of the Afghan Powerful Women’s Movement, and Ms. Yaqoobi held a brief, clandestine news conference in a private home inside a walled compound. They asked the small group of journalists who attended not to livestream the event for fear of alerting the Taliban.

Under the Taliban, Ms. Mubariz told the journalists, “Women have been deprived of the right to work and to participate and political and economic life. They are consistently repressed, punished illegally, insulted and humiliated.”

Such public criticism only heightened the risk of Taliban reprisals, Ms. Yaqoobi acknowledged. “That’s why we have to operate in secret,” she said. “But we will never stop raising our voices.”

Days before the news conference, Ms. Mubariz spoke in a coffee shop’s family section, set aside for women to keep them separated from men. Before the Taliban takeover, several coffee shops in Kabul allowed women to sit and socialize with men — a quiet symbol of progress that has slowly eroded under the Taliban.

Ms. Mubariz said her parents and friends have begged her to cease her protests — or at least to wear body armor to protect herself. She wiped away tears as she described the overwhelming sense of loss she felt since losing her job and watching women’s rights being stripped away.

For Ms. Rezai, the Taliban threats and crackdowns have eroded her once boundless faith in Afghanistan’s future.

“Whatever goals, freedoms, wishes, dreams, choices, education and jobs women once had are gone,” she said. “I am feeling angry — my body is without a soul and all our dreams are nothing now.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 US troops join assault to retake prison
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/world/middleeast/syria-prison-isis-hasaka.html

BAGHDAD — American ground forces have joined the fight to retake control of a prison in northeast Syria where Islamic State fighters are holding hundreds of boys hostage, the Pentagon said Monday.

After four days of American airstrikes, the fight has become the biggest known American engagement with ISIS since the [fall of its so-called caliphate](#) three years ago.

Hundreds of Islamic State fighters [attacked the makeshift prison](#) in Hasaka, Syria, on Friday in an effort to free their detained comrades in one of the boldest attacks by the group in the region in recent years.

The siege of the prison, which houses about 3,000 suspected ISIS fighters and almost 700 boys, has evolved into a hostage crisis with ISIS fighters still holding about a quarter of the prison and [using the boys as human shields](#).

The overcrowded, makeshift prison has long been an avowed target for a [resurgent Islamic State](#). Housed in a converted technical college, it is the largest of several prisons in the region holding thousands of fighters detained after the territorial defeat of ISIS in 2019.

The American-backed force overseeing the prison, the Syrian Democratic Forces, has complained for years that it lacked the ability to operate it securely.

The S.D.F. said that it had recaptured one of the prison's three buildings in a dawn raid on Monday. An S.D.F. spokesman said about 300 Islamic State fighters had surrendered but that ISIS had threatened to kill the boys if the coalition continued its assault on the prison.

"We have some reports saying that ISIS is threatening to kill all the minors if we continue attacking them," the spokesman, Farhad Shami, said.

The aid group Save the Children said it could not independently confirm the casualties but had received audio testimony indicating deaths and injuries among the children.

In a voice recording obtained by Human Rights Watch on Sunday, a boy who identified himself as a 17-year-old Australian said he had been wounded in an airstrike but there was no medical care available.

The Pentagon said that the coalition had moved in armored Bradley fighting vehicles to back the S.D.F. forces, indicating for the first time that U.S. ground forces were involved in the fight. A coalition official said the vehicles had been fired at and had returned fire.

"We have provided limited ground support, strategically positioned to assist security in the area," John F. Kirby, the Pentagon spokesman, told reporters in Washington. U.S. military officials said the Bradleys were being used as barricades while the S.D.F. tightened its cordon around the prison.

The United States has also carried out airstrikes with Apache helicopter gunships over the past four days to try to break the siege, killing an unknown number of prisoners.

The U.S. troops are part of a residual force of the American-led military coalition that was kept in Syria to assist in the fight against ISIS and to protect oil installations. There are currently about 700 American troops in northeast Syria, operating mostly from a base in Hasaka, and another 200 near Syria's border with Jordan.

Mr. Shami said that 30 S.D.F. fighters had been killed in the operation to take back the prison, and that about 200 ISIS fighters and inmates who joined them in an attempt to escape had been killed since Friday. It was not clear how many prisoners had escaped.

The siege of the Sinaa prison in Hasaka demonstrated that the Islamic State still had the ability to mount a coordinated military operation, despite its territorial defeat by the U.S.-led coalition and Kurdish-led forces three years ago.

It has also highlighted the plight of thousands of foreign children brought to the ISIS caliphate in Syria by their parents, who have been detained for three years in camps and prisons in northeastern Syria, and abandoned by their own countries.

The inmates in Hasaka include boys as young as 12, including Syrians, Iraqis and about 150 non-Arab foreigners. Some had been transferred to the prison after they were deemed too old to remain in detention camps that held families of Islamic State suspects.

The Syria director for Save the Children, Sonia Khush, said those holding the children were responsible for their safety. But she also blamed the foreign governments for not repatriating their detained citizens and their children.

“Responsibility for anything that happens to these children also lies at the door of foreign governments who have thought that they can simply abandon their child nationals in Syria,” Ms. Khush said. “Risk of death or injury is directly linked to these governments’ refusal to take them home.”

At its peak, the Islamic State held territory the size of Britain straddling Iraq and Syria. An estimated 40,000 foreigners, including children, made their way to Syria to fight or work for the caliphate.

Thousands of them brought their young children — too young to understand and much too young to make a choice. Other children were born there.

When the last piece of the ISIS caliphate in Baghuz, Syria, fell three years ago, surviving women and young children were put in detention camps while suspected fighters and boys as young as 10 were sent to prison.

The main detention camp for ISIS families, Al Hol, [is squalid, overcrowded and dangerous](#), with not enough food or medical services, not enough guards and an increasingly radicalized segment of detainees who terrorize other camp residents.

When the boys at the camps become teenagers, they are usually transferred to Sinaa prison in Hasaka. Detainees there, including minors, are packed into overcrowded cells without access to sunlight. There is insufficient food and little medical care, according to prison guards in the impoverished breakaway region of Syria known as Rojava.

When they reach age 18, the youths are placed with the general prison population, where wounded ISIS fighters sleep three to a bed. None of the non-Syrian detainees have been charged with a crime or gone to trial.

While Rojava authorities run a rehabilitation center, it has space for only about 150 detainees. When they finish the course, the Syrians are released but the non-Syrians are returned to prison.

“We help them to construct their prisons, to train their staff, to run as good a prison system as they can, but they are not getting what they need,” said Anne Speckhard, director of the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism. “Prisoners are lying on top of each other.”

Thousands of ISIS recruits came from Europe, but most European countries, citing security concerns, [have refused to repatriate their citizens](#), apart from orphans. Some have stripped their nationals detained in Syria of citizenship for joining ISIS.

“As long as it stays over here that’s what everybody wants,” Ms. Speckhard said of countries refusing to repatriate their citizens. “We don’t want it to come over here.”

Rights activists have compared the prison to the U.S. detention center in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, as a place where suspects can be warehoused and forgotten.

	<p>The State Department said Monday that the siege highlighted the need for international financial support to improve security at the prison.</p> <p>“It also underscores the urgent need for countries of origin to repatriate, rehabilitate, reintegrate and prosecute, where appropriate, their nationals detained in northeast Syria,” the State Department’s statement said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Yemen war spilled into Emirates
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/explainer-yemens-war-spilled-emirates-82455942
GIST	<p>CAIRO -- Twice in the past week, Yemen’s rebels have launched attacks with missiles and drones on the United Arab Emirates, a major escalation for one of the world’s most protracted conflicts.</p> <p>The attacks underscore how the war that has ground on for over seven years in the corner of the Arabian Peninsula can flare into a regional danger. One of this week’s attacks targeted an Emirati military base hosting U.S. and British forces.</p> <p>Already, the conflict has killed tens of thousands of civilians and fighters in Yemen and created a yearslong humanitarian disaster in the Arab world’s poorest country.</p> <p>The war pits the internationally recognized government, backed by a coalition including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels. It began in September 2014, when the Houthis seized the capital, Sanaa, and much of northern Yemen. At the time with American backing, the coalition entered the war in March 2015 to support the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, whose forces and other loosely allied militias hold the south.</p> <p>Here’s a look at the latest developments.</p> <p>WHY HAS THE WAR ESCALATED?</p> <p>The Houthis blame the Emirates for significant recent battlefield losses inside Yemen, that have virtually ended their efforts to complete control of the country’s north.</p> <p>Primarily, they are looking to retaliate after their offensive aiming to seize the crucial central Yemeni city of Marib floundered.</p> <p>The Houthis launched the offensive last year, and at times it looked like they might succeed in taking the city from the government. Capturing Marib would have sealed their control over the entire north of Yemen, brought the province’s relative wealth into their hands and given them leverage in future peace negotiations.</p> <p>Despite suffering heavy casualties from coalition airstrikes, the Houthis reached just outside the city. The coalition stepped up ground support to the city’s defenders. But the tide only really turned when Emirati-backed forces known as the Giants Brigade made a concerted push in the southern province of Shabwa this month. They pushed out the Houthis and reclaimed Shabwa, then cut off key Houthi supply lines in Marib province and are now advancing into the province.</p> <p>The escalation prevented Marib from falling into Houthi hands but “it required some political realignments” within the coalition, said Peter Salisbury, a Yemen expert at the International Crisis Group. The Saudis, he said, had to allow the empowering of Emirati-backed forces, undermining allies of Hadi, who has had a longtime rivalry with the UAE.</p> <p>HOUTHİ REACTION</p>

The Houthi's reply has been to fire ballistic missiles and explosive-laden drones, first on Saudi Arabia and now on the UAE.

On Monday, the UAE and U.S. militaries said they intercepted two ballistic missiles over Abu Dhabi. The rebels said they targeted the Al-Dhafra Air Base, which hosts both American and British forces.

Last week, the rebels claimed another attack on Abu Dhabi that targeted the airport and a fuel depot. The strike killed three people and wounded six others.

The attacks threaten the Emirates' business-friendly, tourism-focused reputation.

Earlier this month, the Houthis also seized an Emirati ship in the Red Sea, off the coast of Hodeida, a rebel-held port that the two sides have long battled over. They claimed the vessel carried weapons. The coalition said it carried medical equipment from a dismantled Saudi field hospital on the Yemeni island of Socotra. The coalition has threatened to attack Houthi-held ports if they don't release the vessel.

The rebels also fired missiles and drones at government-held areas in Yemen, often landing on civilian facilities.

In seeming retaliation, the coalition has launched intense airstrikes on Sanaa and other rebel-held areas. The strikes killed dozens of civilians, including over 80 people in a detention center in the northern province of Saada.

Another coalition airstrike on a telecommunications building knocked Yemen off the internet for days before being restored early Tuesday.

Raiman al-Hamdani, a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, said the Houthis are trying to draw the UAE back into a conflict from which it has been trying to extricate itself.

The fighting is "an example of the lack of willingness on all sides to come to any consensus," he said.

STALLED PEACE EFFORTS

The escalation on both sides has brought condemnation from Western powers, who have grown tired of trying to broker a peace in Yemen. Most of that frustration now seems focused on the rebels.

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration is considering reversing a decision last year that lifted the Houthi's terrorist designation.

That de-listing, along with an official end to U.S. support for the coalition, had aimed to calm tensions in hopes of boosting peace efforts and addressing humanitarian needs. Yemeni and Saudi officials have maintained that the U.S. measures only emboldened the Houthis.

The U.S. and U.N. diplomatic moves failed to bring the two sides to negotiations as the Houthis pressed their Marib offensive. In July, U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said that the Biden administration was "beyond fed up" with the Houthis.

The Houthis have also taken a hard line on other fronts. They have not allowed the U.N. special envoy for Yemen, Hans Grundberg, to visit since he was appointed in August. The rebels seized the now-closed U.S. Embassy in Sanaa and detained dozens of local employees. They also detained two U.N. staffers working for the U.N. human rights office and UNESCO.

Some speculate that Iran could be playing a role in their Houthi allies' escalations.

Al-Hamdani, the analyst, is reluctant to give too much credence to the idea that Iran is pulling strings.

	The Houthis may owe Iran for its support, but Iran can't just order them to do something, he said. "This only occurs when it's convenient for both."
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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/24 Australia: man killed by explosive vest
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/australian-reportedly-killed-when-explosive-vest-detonates/
GIST	<p>CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Police were investigating the death of a man who was reportedly killed when an explosive vest he was wearing detonated while he was driving his car in the street in the Australian city of Melbourne.</p> <p>The vest was understood to have been triggered by the car hitting a speed bump in suburban Hallam on Saturday morning, Seven News reported.</p> <p>Security camera video showed the flash of the explosion rise about the roof and from the driver's side window. A speed bump wasn't apparent in the video.</p> <p>The car continued to travel a few hundred meters (yards) before it hit a parked vehicle.</p> <p>A 43-year-old man was found dead inside his car, police said. Police have not released his name.</p> <p>Bomb Response Unit members worked to render the explosives in the car safe, police said. They were investigating the circumstances of the man's death but do not consider him a crime victim.</p> <p>Police did not say where the man was heading. He had visited the home of his ex-partner immediately before his death, Seven reported.</p> <p>Neighbors said police spent almost 24 hours at the scene, Seven reported.</p> <p>"I just heard a big, loud bang at 11 a.m. and looked out the window of my house and saw a car had gone through the roundabout and hadn't braked or anything like that and crashed," witness Ben Augel told Seven.</p> <p>Seven described the driver as a former soldier and a father.</p> <p>A spray painted tribute on a brick wall near the scene of the tragedy said: "Dad my soldier 4 ever" with a love heart.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Paine Field flights canceled over 5G
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/all-flights-in-and-out-of-paine-field-canceled-monday-as-5g-bars-regional-jets/
GIST	<p>As fog shrouded Paine Field in Everett Monday, Alaska Air regional carrier Horizon Air was forced to cancel all commercial flights in and out of the airfield because of limitations on low visibility flying imposed to avoid 5G interference.</p> <p>Horizon is currently the sole airline operating commercial flights out of Paine Field and all those are flown on the Embraer E175, a 76-seat regional jet.</p> <p>The limitations imposed by the Federal Aviation Administration to prevent interference with cockpit instruments have created a problem specific to that aircraft and certain airports, including Paine Field and Portland International Airport.</p>

A dozen arriving flights and a dozen departing flights were canceled Monday at Paine Field, affecting many hundreds of passengers, said Joe Sprague, president at Horizon Air.

“We tried some accommodations through bussing folks down to Sea-Tac,” said Sprague. “Of course, it’s disruptive no matter what, and no guarantee that somebody would be able to get on a similar flight out of Sea-Tac.”

Visibility at Portland’s airport was better Monday and so there were no cancellations there. But Portland could be similarly hit anytime the weather deteriorates, said Sprague.

“We are highly dependent on what the weather does,” said Sprague. “And obviously in the Pacific Northwest, especially this time of year, that’s quite a wild card.”

The new, more powerful 5G radio signals turned on last week at cell towers around the country can potentially interfere with an instrument called an altimeter that’s used to precisely measure how high a plane is above the ground. That data is fed into other systems and a false reading could endanger the aircraft.

Last week, Verizon and AT&T agreed to temporarily hold off on switching on some cell towers close to major airports. The FAA then conducted an airplane-by-airplane and airport-by-airport analysis and cleared many aircraft to fly in low visibility conditions, including all Boeing and Airbus jets at most airports around the country.

Whether the FAA granted clearance depended on what model of altimeter was installed on each aircraft and also how close the cell towers at each airport were to the runways.

The altimeters on Horizon’s Q400 turboprop planes — supplied by Collins — allowed those aircraft to be cleared everywhere. But Sprague said that the specific Honeywell altimeter on the E175 jet required airport-specific limitations.

“The configuration of the Honeywell radio altimeter in the E175, and how it integrates with the other aircraft systems on the E175, are such that the the likelihood of interference from the 5G signal is greater,” said Sprague.

The FAA therefore cleared the E175 to use only runways further away from the cell towers.

While the E175 was barred from using one runway at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, it was cleared for the runway there that’s most typically used for low visibility conditions. That “effectively gave us good coverage for Sea-Tac,” said Sprague.

But the E175 was excluded entirely from low-visibility flying at both Paine Field and Portland International.

The limitations apply not just to Horizon, but to regional carriers like SkyWest that operate local regional flights on behalf of all the major airlines. Some airports in California and around the country have similar restrictions on E175 flights.

Flights out of Paine Field fly to larger vacation destinations, such as Phoenix and Palm Springs. But Portland is a hub for Alaska, and Sprague said that if fog closes in on the city in the coming days, the impact will be greater.

“We’re flying to Eugene and Spokane and places in Montana nonstop out of Portland,” he said. “Service to small communities could also be impacted by virtue of a hub like Portland feeling these impacts.”

	<p>Horizon operates about 300 flights per day, of which about 135 are on the E175 aircraft.</p> <p>How this problem will be resolved is unclear, Sprague said.</p> <p>It's possible the FAA's modeling of the potential interference impact could be adjusted based on additional information from the telecom companies about the cell tower placement and the signal strength.</p> <p>Or the wireless companies might agree to either turn off or reduce power at more cell towers.</p> <p>As to the likelihood of that happening, Sprague said "I just don't have any good feel with respect to the telecom company's willingness to do so."</p> <p>In the meantime, passengers scheduled to fly on E175s from those airports need to check their flight status before setting out for the airport.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Bird flu back in US; what comes next?
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/bird-flu-is-back-in-the-us-no-one-knows-what-comes-next/
GIST	<p>IN THE FIRST days of the new year, on the marshy coastal edge of South Carolina's Lowcountry, a hunter shot an American widgeon, a rusty-fronted duck with a pale beak and a brilliant green stripe. This was not a big deal; the state's duck hunting season runs from Thanksgiving through the end of January. Neither was what happened next: Before taking it home, the hunter let a wildlife biologist affiliated with a government program swab the carcass for lab analysis.</p> <p>But what happened after that was a big deal indeed. After the sample went through its routine check at Clemson University, it made an unusual second stop at a federal lab halfway across the country, in Iowa. The news of what was in the sample percolated through a pyramid of agencies, and on January 14 the US Department of Agriculture revealed why it had attracted so much scrutiny: The South Carolina duck was carrying the Asian strain of H5N1 avian influenza, the first sighting of that pathogen in the continental US in years.</p> <p>But not the last. Just a few days later, the USDA disclosed that two more birds shot by hunters also carried the same pathogen: a teal, shot in the same South Carolina county, and a northern shoveler shot in the far northeast corner of North Carolina, about 400 miles away. The virus in all three was what is known as highly pathogenic—meaning it could cause fast-moving, fatal disease in other bird species, such as poultry, though it was not making the ducks ill.</p> <p>Three birds out of the millions that American hunters shoot each year might seem like nothing—but the findings have sent a ripple of disquiet through the community of scientists who monitor animal diseases. In 2015, that same strain of flu landed in the Midwest's turkey industry and caused the largest animal-disease outbreak ever seen in the US, killing or causing the destruction of more than 50 million birds and costing the US economy more than \$3 billion. Human-health experts are uneasy as well. Since 2003, that flu has sickened at least 863 people across the world and killed more than half of them. Other avian flu strains have made hundreds more people ill. Before Covid arrived, avian flu was considered the disease most likely to cause a transnational outbreak.</p> <p>It is far too soon to say whether the arrival of this virus in the US is a blip, an imminent danger to agriculture, or a zoonotic pathogen probing for a path to attack humanity. But it is a reminder that Covid is not the only disease with pandemic potential, and of how easy it is to lose focus when it comes to other possible threats. The possibility of a human- or animal-origin strain of flu swamping the world once seemed so imminent that back in 2005 the White House wrote a national strategy for it. But researchers say the surveillance schemes that would pick up its movement have since been allowed to drift.</p>

“In wildlife disease surveillance, we’re always chasing a crisis,” says David Stallknecht, director of the Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, a research institute housed at the University of Georgia. “And as soon as the crisis is over, the interest goes down. It’s difficult to keep going long-term. People are here to do the work, but the money isn’t there to support it.”

To understand the importance of those three ducks and the virus they were carrying, we need to take a quick tour through Flu School. Lesson One: The flu virus family tree is vast and sprawling; it contains types—A, B, C, D—and subtypes, designated with Hs and Ns. (Those are short for proteins that let the virus infect cells.) Just within the As, there are almost 200 subtypes; a few affect humans, but almost all of them can infect birds.

Lesson Two: For a long time, scientists thought humans were in little danger from all those other flu strains. That assumption was shattered in 1997, when an avian influenza, H5N1, jumped species in Hong Kong and infected 18 people, killing six of them. To shut it down, the local government slaughtered every chicken in the territory, denying the virus a host. That worked for a few years, but in 2003 H5N1 started to move across the world again, and it has been moving ever since.

Lesson Three: Avian flu can be dangerous to people, but it threatens some birds too. Waterbirds, chiefly ducks, carry it without illness, but it makes chickens sick. Here again, there are subcategories: Avian flu can be low-pathogenic, meaning that it makes birds mildly ill and slows down egg production. Or it can be highly pathogenic, or high-path: a fast-moving infection so vicious that it can kill an entire flock in two days. (A prominent poultry researcher once called it “chicken Ebola.”)

To sum all that up (there will not be a quiz): The flu found in the Carolinas is an H5N1, meaning it is of the subtype that normally infects birds but in the past has sickened people. It is a high-path variety, the kind that can wipe out domesticated flocks. It belongs to a strain related to that first species-crossing jump in 1997. And, to make matters worse, it represents just one instance of a remarkable amount of highly pathogenic H5N1 showing up in the world right now.

Last year, the World Organization for Animal Health (known by its French acronym, OIE) [estimated](#) that between May 1 and November 1, 41 countries experienced outbreaks of highly pathogenic bird flu, with 16,000 isolations of the virus reported just in October. Fifteen countries also reported outbreaks between October and December.

Occasional isolations of avian flu in wild birds are not unusual, but last fall high-path H5N1 began erupting in the United Kingdom with extraordinary intensity. [Since October](#) and [into this year](#), the virus has been found in wild species, including swans, geese, shorebirds, and birds of prey. But it has also invaded poultry farms, primarily in Lincolnshire and Yorkshire. By January, [more than 1 million chickens](#) and other birds had been destroyed to stop it from spreading. In December, the UK’s chief veterinary officer called the occurrence of bird flu there “[phenomenal](#),” saying the strain had spread to the largest number of farm properties ever seen.

At almost the same moment, Dutch authorities were [ordering the slaughter](#) of hundreds of thousands of poultry on farms in the country. In the Czech Republic, more than [100,000 hens died](#) of avian flu on an egg farm, and another 100,000 birds and about 1 million eggs were destroyed to stop the virus from spreading further. In France, farmers feared the virus would invade the duck-raising southwest, the home of foie gras. Last week, the agriculture ministry ordered 2.5 million birds killed. In Italy, more than 4 million poultry died or were slaughtered between October and December. And the Friedrich Loeffler Institute, the animal-disease research unit of the German government, said at the end of December that Europe [was experiencing](#) “the strongest avian influenza epidemic ever,” with cases reaching as far north as the Faroe Islands and as far south as Portugal.

Those slaughter numbers should make the case that the flu is not only a threat to animal welfare, but an engine of economic damage as well. Rabobank, a financial services and analysis firm based in the Netherlands, has [already predicted](#) that these massive culls, layered on top of pandemic-fueled freight problems and rising feed costs, could inflate food prices this year.

For the most part, birds stick to specific north-south migratory pathways and don't fly laterally around the globe. So to scientists in North America, outbreaks of bird flu in Europe were a cause for worry, but not immediate alarm. But in December and again in January, high-path H5N1 was found in farms in Newfoundland, at the top of the migratory flyway that sweeps down the US coast. That is the same flyway that crosses over the Carolinas, where the virus-carrying ducks were caught—and also over the more than 1 billion chickens grown each year in Georgia, the most poultry-dense state in the US.

Because this flu is highly pathogenic, the challenge is that there is no time for mitigation once it arrives in a flock. As Midwest turkey producers experienced in 2015, it blows up into a destructive epidemic overnight. That requires poultry farmers to harden their defenses now—and while that seems like an obvious task, it requires precision and cost in an industry that runs on thin margins and speed. Carol Cardona, a wildlife veterinarian and chair of avian health at the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine, likens it to learning to live under Covid: Every daily action requires a calculation of risk and takes a little more patience than you can easily summon.

“It's the same for growing poultry,” she says. “How do we feed them without introducing a little bit of risk? How do we care for them? In normal times, when we don't have a threat, you can be more efficient in how you do things. But now things have to change. You have to be perfect all the time. That's a lot of stress.”

Scientists who monitor wildlife fret that there is something else going on in this wave of flu. Wild waterbirds are accidental transport vehicles for the virus, but rarely victims. They pick it up and transfer it to other birds in ponds and wetlands at the ends of their migration journeys and then carry it with them, unharmed, once they return to the skies. But in Israel, where [more than a half-million poultry](#) have died or been slaughtered, the first sign of trouble was a mass die-off of [thousands of wild cranes](#) in a wetland that lies directly under a migration route. The European Food Safety Authority has identified deaths from flu in at least 80 other species of wild birds, leaving scientists to wonder whether bird flu has evolved into a further threat.

“The catastrophic issue economically is poultry,” Stallknecht says. “But we also have to be concerned with wildlife health. And there are some populations of shorebirds that are already not in good shape, so we need to be monitoring them also.”

There's also evidence these new waves of bird flu have been leaking into humans. In the first week of January, UK health authorities revealed that a man in Devon who kept ducks as pets had the country's first-ever human case of H5N1 bird flu. The ducks were all slaughtered; the man was reported to be quarantined and [surviving the infection](#) but lonely and missing his birds. In November, the WHO said it has been monitoring a slow surge in human infections in China caused by a known but less common [bird flu subtype, H5N6](#). By the end of 2021, there had been 26 people infected, one of whom [died](#). And in February a year ago, the Russian government revealed that [seven poultry farm workers](#) fell ill (and recovered) from yet another subtype, H5N8.

Other bird-specific strains have been surging into humans as well. The Chinese government disclosed last June that a man who had no known contact with poultry developed an infection with a flu strain [never before seen](#) in humans, H10N3, and that he was hospitalized but recovered. Since 2013, China has recorded [more than 1,600](#) human cases of yet another strain, H7N9.

Though there have been notifications of those outbreaks—the regulations governing the WHO require countries to send immediate notification of high-path avian flu—they have not all included details about genetic sequences or spread. Researchers are hungry for answers. “The question is: What's new?” says Daniel Lucey, an infectious-disease physician and senior scholar at Georgetown University's O'Neill Institute for National and Global Health Law. “The quantity of outbreaks is massive, but has there been a change in qualitative risk? Have the sequences changed so the virus is more likely to infect humans? Can we document person-to-person spread?”

	<p>A further concern lurks behind this bloom of bird flu. Until now, biologists have assumed the danger is seasonal, triggered by the movement of waterbirds as they migrate: If there are no visiting birds overhead, or on shores or in ponds, they can't spread a virus to local birds or people. But researchers are beginning to wonder whether climate change is interfering with migration patterns. The typical pattern for bird flu infections has been for them to begin during the fall migrations and then continue through the winter and into spring. But in Germany last year, scientists were able to identify H5 viruses in wild birds throughout the summer, a first.</p> <p>It's difficult for scientists to make the case for year-round surveillance and better financial support when they can't say whether this wave of flu is a brief aberration or the first moments of a sustained emergency. But the world wouldn't be facing that uncertainty if the capacity for surveillance and analysis had been built after the massive 2015 outbreak, or any of the ones before that. We didn't do it earlier, so the time to start is now.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Heavy rains not enough to halt Calif. fire
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/us/big-sur-wildfire.html
GIST	<p>A fire in January? Californians have, tragically, seen that before.</p> <p>But a fire in January after months of record-breaking rain? That's far more unsettling.</p> <p>A blaze that erupted on the Central Coast over the weekend seemed to stun even those intimately familiar with California's ongoing drought and its increasingly year-round fire season. The National Weather Service's Bay Area office called the fast-moving fire near Big Sur "surreal," given the recent storms.</p> <p>California saw heavy rainfall in the final three months of 2021, leading many to believe that the threat of fire would lessen for at least the next few months. But the latest blaze revealed a harsh reality: The drought has become so severe that even a series of torrential storms wasn't enough to end it.</p> <p>The land in many parts of the state remains extremely parched and, after an unusually dry January, apparently ready to burn.</p> <p>"Anecdotally, it seems as though the long-term drought is acting like a chronic illness where even recent rains" and cold winter weather "isn't helping to keep fires from developing," the National Weather Service's Bay Area office said on Twitter.</p> <p>On Friday night, the brush fire near Big Sur began to grow, forcing hundreds living in a coastal stretch south of Carmel-by-the-Sea to evacuate their homes. At its largest over the weekend, the blaze reached about 1,000 acres and threatened more than 200 homes and buildings. By Monday morning, it was 33 percent contained, according to Cal Fire, the state's fire agency.</p> <p>George Nuñez, a captain with Cal Fire, told my colleague that he had to ask other agencies to help fight the blaze because it hit during the off-season.</p> <p>Typically, his unit has 17 fully staffed fire engines, he said. But that number was reduced to two when fire season officially ended in early January, he said.</p> <p>"Everybody says that California has a year-round fire season," Nunez told The New York Times. "And this is just part of it."</p> <p>Last year, California endured a brutal fire season triggered by unusually high temperatures and severe drought conditions. By the end of 2021, 2.6 million acres had burned across the state, a million more the annual average from the past five years, according to Cal Fire.</p>

Return to Top	<p>Almost all of last year’s destruction happened before a series of storms arrived in October and dumped water across the state. Another series of downpours in December made California seem even safer from fire.</p> <p>Before the storms, 88 percent of California was considered in extreme or exceptional drought, the most severe designations. Now, 1 percent of the state falls into those categories, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.</p> <p>But apparently the improvement wasn’t enough to stop fires all together. Even after the storms, 99 percent of California remains in some level of drought.</p> <p>And January, usually one of the wettest months of the year, has been unseasonably dry. For the past three weeks, plants and soil have been losing much of the moisture they absorbed in late 2021.</p> <p>So when humidity levels dropped on Friday and winds began roaring at up to 50 miles per hour near Big Sur, dangerous fire conditions were set.</p> <p>“It’s unusual to have fire this size here on the coast at the end of January,” Cecile Juliette, a spokeswoman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, told The Associated Press. “The fact that we had a fire this size is of great concern.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/25 NKorea suddenly launching missiles?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/25/world/asia/north-korea-launches-missiles-kim.html
GIST	<p>SEOUL — North Korea began the new year by convening a meeting for the ruling Workers’ Party during which very little was said about the United States. That ominous silence didn’t last long.</p> <p>Kim Jong-un, the country’s ruler, has launched six ballistic missiles in four weapons tests since Jan. 5, almost as many missiles in one month as North Korea launched in all of last year. On Tuesday, the South Korean military confirmed that the North had fired two cruise missiles in its fifth test of 2022.</p> <p>The message was clear: The North Korean leader feels he is being ignored and wants to push the Biden administration to re-engage and pay attention to his economically ailing nation.</p> <p>Individually, the tests may not amount to much — they involved missiles that have already been tested or weapons that are still under development. But taken together, they signal that Mr. Kim plans to use 2022 to jolt the Biden administration out of its diplomatic slumber.</p> <p>Mr. Kim needs Washington to engage with him on economic concessions so that he can fix his country’s devastated economy. Over the years, he has learned that the best way to grab the attention of an American president is with weapons. And that the best time to do it is when the world can least afford the instability. According to that playbook, 2022 looks like a promising year.</p> <p>China is busy preparing for the Beijing Olympics next month. South Korea elects a new president in March. Russia has hinted at a potential invasion of Ukraine, keeping the Biden administration on tenterhooks.</p> <p>During a Politburo meeting last Wednesday, Mr. Kim suggested that his government might once again begin testing long-range missiles and nuclear devices after suspending such tests before his 2018 summit meeting with President Donald J. Trump.</p> <p>“2022 calls for continued saber-rattling, punctuated by some major missile tests,” said Lee Sung-yoon, a North Korea expert at the Fletcher School at Tufts University. “Kim’s goal is to routinize short-range ballistic missile flights as a fact of life without any repercussions, after which he will move on to bigger</p>

provocations by resuming intermediate- and long-range missile tests punctuated by a nuclear test, as he did in 2017.”

That year, North Korea tested what it called a hydrogen bomb and also launched three intercontinental ballistic missiles. It was also the year Mr. Trump took office after a vicious campaign in the United States. South Korea had just [impeached its president](#).

Wednesday was the second time Mr. Kim threatened to lift the moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests. After his diplomacy with Mr. Trump ended without an agreement in 2019, he [said](#) he no longer felt bound by the commitment. But he did not follow through with any such tests, and his country was soon plunged into the [chaos](#) of the coronavirus pandemic.

This year also marks the beginning of Mr. Kim’s second decade in power, and a chance for him to reassert his authority.

Ever since taking over, he has focused on building the country’s arsenal to validate his family’s dynastic rule, calling his nuclear weapons a “treasured sword” that protects North Korea against foreign invasion.

During the meeting on Wednesday, he urged North Koreans to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the birth of his father and predecessor, Kim Jong-il, in February, as well as the 110th birthday of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, in April.

Under his father and grandfather, North Korea had seemed open to shelving its nuclear ambitions. But those hopes have dissipated under Mr. Kim, who has rapidly expanded the country’s nuclear program, even as the United Nations piled on sanctions.

Though [Mr. Kim](#) has often been depicted abroad as a leader potentially capable of opening up his isolated country for the sake of economic development, his nuclear weapons are, as North Korea has put it, “not a bargaining chip.”

Rather, the country sees them as tools to bring Washington to the negotiating table. And by that logic, the more powerful the arsenal, the more leverage Mr. Kim has.

Even when he vowed to focus on economic development in 2013, Mr. Kim stuck to his “[parallel](#)” goal of strengthening his nuclear force. The country has conducted more than 130 missile tests under him, compared with a total of 16 tests under his father and 15 under his grandfather. The last four of the North’s six nuclear tests all took place under his watch.

“By advancing its nuclear capabilities and weapons systems, North Korea is showing the United States and South Korea that the more time passes, the bigger the price will become that they have to pay,” Choi Yong-hwan, an analyst at the Institute for National Security Strategy in Seoul, [wrote in a recent policy paper](#).

Yet try as it may to flex its power, North Korea appears to be low on the Biden administration’s list of international priorities.

Washington has taken no steps to entice Mr. Kim, except to propose talks “without preconditions,” a lukewarm entreaty that North Korea has rebuffed.

But it has not resumed tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles. Instead, North Korea has focused on testing missiles that can carry what it calls “smaller, lighter and tactical” nuclear weapons. These kinds of weapons do not pose a direct threat to the United States, but they could boost Mr. Kim’s leverage with Washington by placing American allies such as South Korea and Japan under nuclear threat.

In North Korea's [first](#) two tests this month, the country launched short-range ballistic missiles with what it called "[hypersonic gliding vehicles](#)," detachable warheads that make the weapons harder to intercept because they not only fly extremely fast but also change course during flight.

In a [test on Jan. 13](#), North Korea launched the KN-23, one of three [new solid-fuel ballistic missiles](#) the North has been testing since 2019.

Solid-fuel missiles are easier to transport and launch. The KN-23 can perform low-altitude maneuvers, making them harder to intercept. North Korea has also begun launching KN-23 variants from a submarine, as it [did](#) in October, and from trains, as it did [in September](#) and again [this month](#).

In its [most recent test](#), North Korea fired a pair of solid-fuel missiles from a mobile launcher vehicle. When the North first launched such a pair in 2019, there was a 16-minute interval between the two missiles fired.

That gap was reduced to four minutes in the recent test, indicating that the military has improved its ability to fire multiple missiles and hide them from counterattacks by the United States and South Korea.

"North Korea hopes that if it continues to demonstrate its nuclear capabilities but confines them to the Korean Peninsula, it will not aggravate public opinion in the United States and will strengthen voices there calling for a compromise," Cha Du-hyeogn, a principal fellow at the Seoul-based Asan Institute for Policy Studies, wrote in a recent [paper](#).

For that strategy to work, Mr. Kim will need continued help from China in resisting any new international sanctions. North Korea's economic challenges [were deepened](#) two years ago when it shut its border with China to fight the pandemic. This month, Beijing [confirmed](#) that "through friendly consultations," China and North Korea reopened their border for freight trains.

"This timing suggests Beijing is more than complicit with Pyongyang's provocations," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor of international studies at Ewha Womans University in Seoul. "China is supporting North Korea economically and coordinating with it militarily."

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HEADLINE	01/24 Omicron defied normal rules of evolution?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/24/science/omicron-mutations-evolution.html?action=click&module=RelatedLinks&pgtype=Article
GIST	<p>As nurses and doctors struggle with a record-breaking wave of Omicron cases, evolutionary biologists are engaged in a struggle of their own: figuring out how this world-dominating variant came to be.</p> <p>When the Omicron variant took off in southern Africa in November, scientists were taken aback by its genetic makeup. Whereas earlier variants had differed from the original Wuhan version of the coronavirus by a dozen or two mutations, Omicron had 53 — a shockingly large jump in viral evolution.</p> <p>In a study posted online last week, an international team of scientists further deepened the mystery. They found that 13 of those mutations were rarely, if ever, found in other coronaviruses, suggesting they should have been harmful to Omicron. Instead, when acting in concert, these mutations appear to be key to some of Omicron's most essential functions.</p> <p>Now the researchers are trying to figure out how Omicron defied the normal rules of evolution and used these mutations to become such a successful vector of disease.</p> <p>"There's a mystery here that someone has to figure out," said Darren Martin, a virologist at the University of Cape Town who worked on the new study.</p>

Mutations are a regular part of a coronavirus's existence. Every time a virus replicates inside of a cell, there's a small chance that the cell will create a flawed copy of its genes. Many of those mutations would make new viruses defective and unable to compete with other viruses.

But a mutation can also improve a virus. It could make the virus stick more tightly to cells, for example, or make it replicate faster. Viruses that inherit a beneficial mutation may outcompete others.

Over most of 2020, scientists found that different lineages of the coronavirus around the world gradually picked up a handful of mutations. The evolutionary process was slow and steady, until the end of the year.

In December 2020, British researchers were jolted to discover [a new variant](#) in England carrying 23 mutations not found in the original coronavirus isolated in Wuhan a year before.

That variant, later named Alpha, soon swept to dominance worldwide. Over the course of 2021, [other fast-spreading variants](#) emerged. While some remained limited to certain countries or continents, the Delta variant, with [20 distinctive mutations](#), ousted Alpha and became dominant over the summer.

And then [came Omicron](#), with over twice as many mutations. As soon as Omicron came to light, Dr. Martin and his colleagues set about reconstructing the variant's radical evolution by comparing its 53 mutations with those of other coronaviruses. Some mutations were shared by Omicron, Delta and other variants, suggesting that they had arisen several times, and that natural selection had favored them over and over again.

But the scientists found a very different pattern when they looked at the "[spike](#)" protein that studs Omicron's surface and allows it to latch on to cells.

Omicron's spike gene has 30 mutations. The researchers found that 13 of them were extraordinarily rare in other coronaviruses — even their distant viral cousins found in bats. Some of the 13 had never been seen before in the millions of coronavirus genomes scientists have sequenced over the course of the pandemic.

If a mutation were beneficial to the virus, or even neutral, scientists would expect it to show up more often in the samples. But if it is rare or missing altogether, that's typically a sign that it is harmful to the virus, preventing it from multiplying.

"When you see that pattern, it's telling you something very loud and very clear," Dr. Martin said. "Anything that sustains a change at those sites is probably going to be defective and isn't going to survive for very long and will die out."

And yet Omicron was flouting that logic. "Omicron wasn't exactly dying out," Dr. Martin said. "It was just taking off like nothing we'd ever seen before."

What makes these 13 mutations all the more intriguing is that they're not randomly sprinkled across Omicron's spike. They form three clusters, each altering a small portion of the protein. And each of those three areas play a big part of what makes Omicron unique.

Two of the clusters change the spike near its tip, making it harder for human antibodies to stick to the virus and keep it out of cells. As a result, Omicron is good at infecting even people who have antibodies from vaccinations or a previous Covid infection.

The third cluster of mutations alters the spike closer to its base. This region, known as the fusion domain, swings into action once the tip of the spike has hooked onto a cell, enabling the virus to deliver its genes inside its new host.

Typically, coronaviruses use the fusion domain to merge with a cell's membrane. Their genes can then float away into the depths of the cell.

But Omicron's fusion domain usually does something different. Rather than merging into the cell membrane, the whole virus gets swallowed up in a kind of cellular sink hole, which pinches off to form a bubble inside the cell. Once the virus is captured inside the bubble, it can break open and release its genes.

This new pathway to infection may help to explain why Omicron is less severe than Delta. The cells in the upper airway can readily swallow up Omicron in bubbles. But [deep in the lungs](#), where Covid can cause life-threatening damage, coronaviruses have to fuse to cells, which Omicron doesn't do well.

These three regions of the spike seem to have been important for Omicron's success. This makes it all the more puzzling that these 13 mutations were so vanishingly rare before Omicron.

Dr. Martin and his colleagues suspect the reason is "epistasis": an evolutionary phenomenon that can cause mutations to be harmful on their own, but beneficial when combined.

Omicron may have turned a batch of 13 bad mutations to its advantage by evolving under unusual conditions. One possibility is that it arose after a sustained period inside the body of a person with an especially weak immune system, such as an H.I.V. patient. People with chronic Covid infections can become evolutionary laboratories, hosting many generations of coronaviruses.

Evolution can play out very differently in such a host than it would hopping from one healthy person to another every few days or weeks.

"Now it's stuck in this one individual, so all of a sudden it's doing things that it normally wouldn't do," said Sergei Pond, an evolutionary biologist at Temple University and an author of the new study.

Because an immunocompromised host doesn't produce a lot of antibodies, many viruses are left to propagate. And new mutant viruses that resist the antibodies can multiply.

A mutation that allows a virus to evade antibodies isn't necessarily advantageous. It could make the virus's spike protein unstable so that it can't latch quickly onto a cell, for example. But inside someone with a weak immune system, viruses may be able to gain a new mutation that stabilizes the spike again.

Similar mutations could have built upon themselves again and again in the same person, Dr. Pond speculates, until Omicron evolved a spike protein with just the right combination of mutations to allow it to spread supremely well among healthy people.

"It certainly seems plausible," said Sarah Otto, an evolutionary biologist at the University of British Columbia who was not involved in the study. But she said scientists still needed to run experiments to rule out alternative explanations.

It's possible, for example, that the 13 spike mutations offer no benefit to Omicron at all. Instead, some of the other spike mutations could be making Omicron successful, and the 13 are just along for the ride.

"I would be cautious about interpreting the data to indicate that all of these previously deleterious mutations have been adaptively favored," Dr. Otto said.

Dr. Pond also acknowledged that his hypothesis still has some big gaps. For example, it's not clear why, during a chronic infection, Omicron would have gained an advantage from its new "bubble" method for getting into cells.

"We just lack imagination," Dr. Pond said.

James Lloyd-Smith, a disease ecologist at U.C.L.A. who was not involved in the study, said that the research revealed just how hard it is to reconstruct the evolution of a virus, even one that arose recently. "Nature is certainly doing its part to keep us humble," he said.

HEADLINE	01/24 History's largest space telescope poised
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/dypxgm/the-space-telescope-that-will-look-for-alien-life-is-reaching-its-final-destination?utm_source=email&utm_medium=editorial&utm_content=daily&utm_campaign=220124&utm_term=daily_automation_interest
GIST	<p>After a generation of hard work and anticipation, the James Webb Space Telescope, the largest and most powerful space observatory in history, is poised to reach its final destination on Monday, where it will peer deeper into the universe than ever before, potentially glimpsing the first stars and galaxies.</p> <p>Since it was launched into space on Christmas Day, Webb has traveled one million miles to Lagrange Point 2 (L2), an area of equilibrium created by the gravitational fields of Earth and the Sun.</p> <p>The telescope is the product of a decades-long collaboration between NASA, the European Space Agency, and the Canadian Space Agency. With 100 times the sensitivity of the Hubble Space Telescope, Webb is expected to shed light on a host of exciting scientific mysteries, including whether alien life exists on other planets.</p> <p>The Webb team is gearing up to briefly fire the telescope's thrusters at around 2pm ET on Monday, a move that should nudge it into orbit around the Sun at L2. NASA plans to hold a press conference at 4pm ET to announce the telescope's arrival at its new home, where it will offer never-before-seen views of our universe.</p> <p>"We'll be monitoring the maneuver in real time, and it's only five minutes—it's a very short maneuver," said Karen Richon, the James Webb Space Telescope flight dynamics engineer lead at NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, in a call. "Soon after that, we'll know in real time whether the spacecraft operated as we expected."</p> <p>Lagrange points are weird locations in space where the gravitational pull of two large bodies, such as stars or planets, can strike a balance with the centripetal force of a small object, such as an orbiting spacecraft.</p> <p>L2 is located behind Earth from the perspective of the Sun, making it an ideal parking spot for an infrared telescope like Webb. This is because, to gaze back into the ancient universe, Webb needs shade from the glare of the Sun. At L2, the observatory's sunshield will always be positioned toward the inner solar system, creating a permanent dark side that will keep the telescope's instruments at a chilly -223°C (-370°F). Those frigid temperatures allow Webb to capture infrared light from distant targets without distortion from nearby heat sources.</p> <p>In the days following its launch, Webb completed two trajectory corrections that placed it on a smooth path toward L2. These initial maneuvers were performed by thrusters designed to propel the telescope in its folded-up form.</p> <p>"The first two maneuvers were amazingly accurate," Richon said. "I have worked on many missions, and I've never really had the first time you use a propulsion system be within 1 percent of what you predicted and modeled, so that was wonderful. It was a little more accurate on the second burn because we learned from the first one."</p> <p>Over the past several weeks, however, Webb has blossomed into its final form, successfully performing a complex sequence of commands that involved navigating hundreds of potential failure points.</p> <p>For this reason, Monday's maneuver will be performed by another set of thrusters matched to the fully unboxed version of the telescope, which has a different center-of-gravity. Despite the fact that these thrusters have not yet been tested in space, Richon said she doesn't think the maneuver is particularly</p>

	<p>risky. Even if something goes wrong with the thrusters, there is a redundant set on Webb that could jump into action, she noted.</p> <p>The thrusters that will fire today will also continue to stabilize Webb's wide orbit at L2 for the rest of its mission, which is projected to last 20 years or more. The telescope's path around the point is wider than the Moon's orbit around Earth, and looks sort of like a "curved potato chip," Richon noted.</p> <p>Though Webb is now poised to reach its destination, it will still need about six months to calibrate its instruments before it can begin its science mission. But if all goes to plan, the telescope will be ready to send its observations back to Earth this summer, officially marking a new era in our understanding of the universe.</p>
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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/24 Whatcom Co. sting: drugs, guns seized
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/man-arrested-drugs-guns-seized-during-whatcom-county-sting/T2GYW3FZG5E3DNRR5XBDHVUTAM/
GIST	<p>WHATCOM COUNTY, Wash. — A Ferndale man was arrested, and drugs and guns were seized after a months-long investigation by the Whatcom Gang and Drug Task Force.</p> <p>The WGDTF had been investigating a suspected drug house in the 3400 block of Slater Road in Bellingham. Detectives reported that 57-year-old Douglas Sandstrom, a felon, had sold heroin and suspected fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills to an agent of the task force at least four times.</p> <p>Sandstrom was arrested at this home Thursday, where a search warrant was served. Police said they found cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine, hundreds of suspected fentanyl-laced pills, and drug paraphernalia, including scales and packaging materials.</p> <p>Six guns were also found, including two that were stolen and one that had an illegal sawed-off short barrel.</p> <p>Sandstrom was booked into the Whatcom County Jail for suspicion of four counts of delivery of a controlled substance, maintaining a drug house, six counts of unlawful possession of a firearm, two counts of possession of a stolen firearm, and possession of an unlawful firearm.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 WSP investigates drive-by shootings
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/washington-state-patrol-investigating-two-drive-by-shootings/2T4URSLRPNA6DA2U7LMYQKB4WQ/
GIST	<p>The Washington State Patrol is investigating two separate drive-by shootings which occurred over the last couple days.</p> <p>On Friday, a semi-truck was traveling on westbound Interstate 90 near milepost 32 when a white car fired a gun striking the truck in the door and causing interior damage.</p> <p>The semi-truck driver did not sustain any injuries.</p> <p>The driver told detectives he observed a passenger pulling a shotgun back into the car after he heard the gunfire.</p> <p>On Sunday, just after midnight, the Washington State Patrol received a report that a car was struck by gunfire while traveling on southbound State Route 509 near 128th in Burien.</p>

	<p>The driver told detectives they approached a slow moving dark colored sedan and heard several shots. Their car was struck with bullets and no injuries occurred.</p> <p>Washington State Patrol detectives are asking anyone with information about these two shootings to contact Detective Olsen at franklin.olsen@wsp.wa.gov.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Everett program protect catalytic converters
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/everett-offers-way-to-protect-your-catalytic-converter
GIST	<p>EVERETT, Wash. - The city of Everett wants to protect your car's catalytic converter with a new program they hope will help identify stolen devices, and possibly deter crime altogether.</p> <p>A catalytic converter is the metal device under your car that cleans the exhaust leaving your vehicle, but recently, it has been a target for thieves.</p> <p>Crooks are getting so good that they can steal the catalytic converter in a few minutes or even seconds, leaving you with a cost that could get into the thousands of dollars.</p> <p>"I felt very victimized. I felt very frustrated," said Claudia McClain.</p> <p>McClain said someone stole her catalytic converter right in front of her face, she just didn't realize it. A few months back, McClain said she sat in her office, which is just a few feet from where she parks her car.</p> <p>She said someone slipped into the parking lot, unnoticed, stole her catalytic converter, and got away. She didn't realize until she got into her car to head home after work.</p> <p>"Turned on the ignition, and I heard this most horrific sound," she said.</p> <p>Fixing the issue ended up costing McClain \$2,200, she said.</p> <p>The most ironic part of the situation is McClain is the founder of McClain Insurance Services. She said she gets calls every couple of weeks from her clients dealing with the same problem.</p> <p>McClain said these thefts are on the rise, and the Everett Police Department agrees.</p> <p>That is why they created Project CATCON ID. The program allows drivers to get their car's vehicle identification number engraved and highlighted with bright paint right on the catalytic converter.</p> <p>That way, if your catalytic converter is stolen, there is a better chance police can ID it, and recover it. Police also hope this effort may deter criminals from targeting your converter in the first place.</p> <p>"I feel like with this much focus both from the community and from the police department, that there is a better chance we'll have some success," said McClain.</p> <p>McClain said she plans to attend the event, and is recommending her clients do the same.</p> <p>The next Project CATCON ID takes place this Saturday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Sno-Isle TECH, located at 9001 Airport Road in Everett.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Seattle armed robberies; juveniles arrests
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/four-juveniles-arrested-after-series-seattle-armed-robberies/TRPVCHAQUZFCNKQ56ET6EEUS4Q/
GIST	SEATTLE — Four juveniles were arrested Thursday after several armed robberies in the Seattle area, according to Seattle police.

	<p>On Thursday, at around 5:10 p.m., Seattle police responded to a call of a robbery in the 300 block of 30th Avenue South.</p> <p>Seattle police said a juvenile victim was approached by three juvenile women and one juvenile man, before the man started to rip off the victim's backpack.</p> <p>When the victim resisted, the man pulled out a fixed blade knife and threatened him with it.</p> <p>The three women then removed the victim's backpack and took items out of the victim's pockets.</p> <p>Seattle police said the same four suspects had committed a purse snatch robbery from an elderly woman just an hour earlier.</p> <p>Police located the suspects on 23rd Avenue near Garfield High School, where both the victims of the previous robberies positively identified all four suspects.</p> <p>Witnesses told police the suspects likely committed a third robbery earlier in the day at Garfield, but the victim ran off and officers were unable to locate him.</p> <p>Officers found belongings from that victim and his phone number among the suspects' property after their arrest.</p> <p>All four suspects were booked into the Youth Service Center on multiple counts of armed robbery.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Spokane cops kill man holding baby, knife
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/law-justice/2-spokane-cops-shoot-kill-man-holding-baby-at-knifepoint/
GIST	<p>SPOKANE — Spokane Police shot and killed a man who was holding a baby at knifepoint, according to Spokane Police Chief Craig Meidl.</p> <p>Meidl said police responded to an area of north Spokane at 12:45 p.m. Monday when they received a report from a distressed woman, KXLY-TV reported.</p> <p>Meidl said they found the man holding an infant and knife. Two officers fired their weapons at the man and the man died at a hospital, Meidl said. The baby wasn't hurt, he said.</p> <p>Meidl did not say what the relationships are between the woman, man and baby. Their names and the names of the officers who shot the man haven't been released.</p> <p>The Spokane Independent Investigative Response Team is now looking into the incident, according to police.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Pierce Co. jail: homicide suspect dead
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/crime/article257674193.html
GIST	<p>A man charged in a fatal Spanaway shooting killed himself while being held in Pierce County Jail, according to the Sheriff's Department.</p> <p>Antonio DeJesus Espinoza, 28, was found dead in his cell Jan. 7. Corrections deputies were bringing a meal to Espinoza, who was being housed alone, about 9:40 a.m. when they allegedly found him hanging from his metal bunk bed by a blanket.</p> <p>The Medical Examiner's Office has not yet ruled on a cause of death.</p>

A death investigation was immediately launched and found no sign of foul play, sheriff's Sgt. Darren Moss said.

Espinoza was housed in a maximum security section of the jail where inmates are checked on every 30 to 45 minutes. He was not on suicide watch.

Espinoza was charged with first-degree murder, second-degree kidnapping and second-degree unlawful possession of a firearm in the Dec. 31 homicide of Jim Gastelum, 31. He had pleaded not guilty and was being held on \$1 million bail.

No motive was determined in the shooting, but detectives found suspected narcotics in Espinoza's garage where the shooting occurred.

It was Espinoza's father who told investigators he saw Gastelum pull up to their home and speak with Espinoza for a few before minutes before his son shot the other man, according to charging papers.

Neighbors reported hearing at least six gunshots. By the time deputies arrived in the 21600 block of 41st Avenue East, Espinoza had fled in the sedan that Gastelum arrived in. He allegedly held the driver at gunpoint and forced her to take him to an apartment complex, where he found another ride. Several expended .45-caliber shell casings, money, suspected narcotics and medications were found in the garage, records say.

Espinoza allegedly had fentanyl laced pills on him when he turned himself in three days after the shooting.

He'd also cut off an electronic home-monitoring device a judge ordered him to wear after being charged in a March 2021 domestic violence incident where he allegedly beat and threatened to kill his girlfriend.

In light of Espinoza's death, the homicide charges for Gastelum's death were dismissed.

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HEADLINE	01/24 Advocates: violence against homeless rise
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-vb/2022/01/24/serial-murders-beatings-beheadings-violence-against-homeless-is-increasing-advocates-say/
GIST	<p>The first victim was found lying below the palm trees and the blinking glass towers of Miami's downtown skyline. It was December 21st. At around 8 p.m. a police officer was flagged down by a passerby about a man lying unconscious on the sidewalk. He'd been shot in the head.</p> <p>The victim was rushed to the hospital, where he fought for his life. But even before investigators could conduct a hospital bed interview, another call came in. Two miles north, law enforcement found the body of Jerome Antonio Price. Five 9mm gunshot wounds crawled up the back of his shirt. He was pronounced dead shortly after 10 p.m.</p> <p>"Officers quickly connected the two incidents not only because of the short span of time between the two shootings but because both incidents involved victims that were homeless," Miami Police interim chief Manuel Morales said at a news conference two days later.</p> <p>Investigators chased leads, weaving developments into a fact pattern. Ballistics matched the two shootings. Video surveillance near the second incident caught gunfire erupting from a dark Dodge Charger. The car's tag showed it was registered to 25-year-old Willy Suarez Maceo. When the suspect was taken into custody, he was found with a 9mm Glock handgun. The firearm matched shell casing involved in the shootings.</p> <p>Maceo has since been charged with felony murder, and Morales said police believe he may also be responsible for the earlier fatal shooting in October of another man living on the streets. Maceo, a real</p>

estate agent who posed with Porsches and preached the benefits of cryptocurrency on social media, has since been characterized by authorities as a suspected serial killer who targeted people experiencing homelessness.

“We have a very dangerous person off of the streets now,” Miami Mayor Francis Suarez announced following the arrest. Maceo’s attorneys did not respond to a request for comment. His alleged crimes are an extreme example of targeted attacks on the homeless happening across the country.

According to experts and advocates, the last year has seen a spike in violence against the homeless. There was [a beheading](#) in Colorado. A sleeping [man lit on fire](#) in the stairwell of a New York City apartment complex. An attack by [four juveniles](#) on a sleeping woman in Washington state. Beyond these lurid headlines, however, are dozens of daily acts of violence occasioned by increasing collisions between the housed and unhoused populations in the wake of the [coronavirus](#) pandemic, experts say.

“We do believe there is an increase based on news reports and reports from advocates,” said Donald Whitehead, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless. For the past four years, homelessness numbers [have climbed](#) in America, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, a trend that is expected to continue in 2022.

The response in many communities to these increases has been “a criminalization of homelessness,” Whitehead said. “That creates this culture of people not being important. Or people being less-than. It gives people permission to commit violence.”

Crime perpetrated by unhoused people against others is certainly also happening. On Jan. 16, Martial Simon, 61, who police have said was unhoused, [fatally pushed](#) Michelle Alyssa Go, 40, in front of a New York City subway in Times Square.

But past studies have shown the homeless are more likely to be victims of [violent crime](#) than housed people. Tracking crimes against individuals experiencing homelessness has always presented a deeper challenge. Unlike sex or race, housing status is not often a factor logged by authorities when recording a crime victim’s details.

People experiencing homelessness are also often reluctant to engage with law enforcement even when they are the victims of a crime.

“They may have had bad experiences in the past with police,” said Bobby Watts, chief executive of the National Health Care for the Homeless Council. “Many of them also have outstanding warrants. Not because of major crimes, but most of those citations would be for vagrancy or public urination, because they don’t have anywhere else to carry out these activities.”

But advocates are mounting a new effort to try to capture violence against the unhoused. In 2020, the National Coalition of the Homeless released a report looking at 20 years of police reports related to crime targeting people living on the street. The [analysis found](#) that between 1999 and 2019, there were 1,852 incidents of violence against homeless individuals. Of those attacks, 515 were fatal.

California, Florida and Texas made up the majority of those attacks over the two decades, with 390, 261, and 102, respectively. In the same time period, the District of Columbia saw 58 attacks against unhoused individuals.

In 2019, the year before the pandemic, the report noted 83 attacks nationwide, with 39 resulting in death. The report noted 97 percent of the lethal attacks were perpetrated by men, while 85 percent of the fatal victims were also men.

No significant statistics have been published since the start of the pandemic, but advocates say they also believe crimes against the unsheltered have increased because more people are living on the streets.

“2020 was the first time we saw people experiencing unsheltered homelessness exceeding that of those in shelters,” Watts said.

The increased levels of unhoused individuals have also triggered a public backlash against homelessness. The National Coalition of the Homeless has tracked homeless encampment sweeps in 55 jurisdictions between January 2020 and July 2021. Advocates argue these public displacements pit the homeless against law enforcement, while also creating an atmosphere of official hostility toward this vulnerable population.

“What you will hear is that these sweeps are an effort to put people into housing,” said Whitehead. “But what we are hearing is that the opportunities for getting into housing are overrepresented. These sweeps also focuses people into more remote locations, where the opportunity for people to perpetuate violence against them is more readily available.”

Homelessness can also make people convenient targets for the free-floating anger stirred up by almost two years of social distress.

“The pandemic has increased crime across the board,” Watts said. “It also has led to rage, and people experiencing homelessness are easy targets for those who want to express rage or dissatisfaction with the way their own lives are going.”

But advocates want to move beyond merely collecting grisly lists of violent episodes. The National Coalition for the Homeless is teaming with other groups to present a broader study of the recent violence. Spearheaded by Brian Davis, its director of grass roots organizing, the effort aims to focus on patterns and risk factors within the incidents.

“Right now, we track news stories, and then we have a lawyer work to see if the crimes are in fact hate crimes against the homeless, or homeless on homeless crimes, or regular street crime. We have to narrow down the broader violence that happens on the street to see if it targeted violence,” Davis said. “One thing that we’re working on with some researchers is to figure out what factors are most likely to lead to a person facing violence, and how we can avoid those.”

The report, which Davis hopes will publish in late 2022, will also utilize the responses from small survey groups of people experiencing homelessness. The hypothesis going into the study will be that for every 60 days without housing, an individual is likely to experience at least one violent incident. The likelihood increases if the individual is female.

The effort is geared toward hammering out the statistical dangers of living on the street, Davis said.

“There needs to be some urgency about finding safe spaces for people,” he said. “In my experience, we’ve let lots of people languish while waiting for housing to become available. We have to show that there are real world consequences, people are attacked, robbed and raped, because they are waiting for shelter.”

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HEADLINE	01/24 Germany: gunman opens fire in university
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/24/gunman-dead-and-several-injured-after-shooting-in-heidelberg
GIST	<p>One person was shot dead and three others were injured when an 18-year-old man opened fire on his fellow students in a packed lecture hall in the German university town of Heidelberg, according to police.</p> <p>The gunman, who was enrolled in the same course in life sciences as the students he attacked, entered the university hall shortly before 12.25pm, while a lecture was in progress, carrying a rifle and a double-barrelled shotgun.</p>

After firing at least three shots into the group of 30 students, the man fled the building and turned one of his weapons on himself. At 12.51pm police discovered his body. His name has not yet been disclosed.

Police said two German woman aged 19 and 21 and a 20-year-old German-Italian citizen variously sustained injuries to the legs, back and face. A 23-year-old woman who received a head wound died from her injuries in hospital two hours later.

Andreas Herrgen, the head of the Heidelberg public prosecutor's office, described it as a "horrific deed" that had shaken the city. He said the attack would leave psychological scars on the injured and also other students in the lecture hall, many of whom had feared for their lives.

Investigators were not attributing religious or political motives to the attack at this stage, police said. The tabloid Bild reported that investigators were working on the assumption that the attack was motivated by the perpetrator's psychological problems or relationship issues.

The perpetrator, a German citizen registered as living in the nearby city of Mannheim, announced his plan to another person in a WhatsApp message directly before the attack, said Siegfried Kollmar, Heidelberg's chief of police.

In the message, the perpetrator said people "needed to be punished" and that he wanted to be buried at sea rather than at a cemetery.

Police said the attacker was believed to have bought his weapons outside Germany, and he and his family were not licensed to carry arms.

Germany's gun control system, one of the most stringent in Europe, restricts the acquisition, possession and carrying of firearms to those with a credible need for a weapon.

Heidelberg police arrived on the scene of the attack at 12.30pm, having received seven emergency calls within less than a minute shortly beforehand.

People were advised via social media to stay away from the Neuenheimer Feld area, where the science faculties of the city's university, the university clinic and the botanical gardens are located. Students were told by email to avoid the area.

Heidelberg, a picturesque city nestled around the River Neckar, is located south of Frankfurt and has about 160,000 inhabitants. Its university is the oldest and one of the best known in Germany.

News of the attack was met with shock among the student community. "It is with great distress and a heavy heart that I have received news of the events on our campus on Neuenheimer Feld," said Tanja Modrow, the director of Studierendenwerks Heidelberg, a care organisation for the 49,000 students at the university. "Our thoughts are with the injured and families."

Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz, expressed his condolences for the victims and other students, saying hearing the news had "broken his heart".

Winfried Kretschmann, the Green state premier of Baden-Württemberg, said he had been "deeply affected" by the events in the university city. "My thoughts are with the families and relatives," he said. "We are on their side."

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HEADLINE	01/24 NYPD: suspect behind police shooting dies
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/lashawn-mcneil-harlem-police-shooting-suspect-dies-jason-rivera-wilbert-mora/

GIST	<p>Lashawn McNeil, the man accused of shooting two New York City Police Department officers, killing one and leaving the other in critical condition, has died from his police-inflicted wounds, NYPD confirmed to CBS News on Monday. McNeil, 47, had been hospitalized since his Friday encounter with police, during which he was shot in head and arm as he tried to flee.</p> <p>Police on Friday responded to a call from McNeil's mother, who told officers she was in a dispute with her son. When officers arrived at the Harlem residence, McNeil's mother told them McNeil was in a bedroom at the end of a hallway. As officers made their way towards the room, McNeil opened the door and opened fire, police said. Officer Jason Rivera, 22, was shot and killed and officer Wilbert Mora, 27, was wounded. As of Monday, Mora remained hospitalized in grave condition, CBS New York reports.</p> <p>A Glock 45, which police say was stolen in Baltimore in 2017, with a high-capacity magazine was recovered at the scene.</p> <p>The shooting, which New York City Mayor Eric Adams called "an attack on the city of New York," marked the fifth time an NYPD officer had been shot in January.</p> <p>Following the shooting, several New York politicians announced plans and policies targeting illegal gun practices. Adams announced Sunday he plans to reinstitute anti-gun plainclothes police units, groups that dissolved following backlash surrounding police brutality in 2020.</p> <p>New York Governor Kathy Hochul also announced a new Interstate Task Force on Illegal Guns focused on taking illegal guns off the street and determining where they are coming from.</p> <p>"We have a moral obligation to do everything we can to fight the scourge of illegal guns on our streets," Hochul said. "Too many lives have been lost because of illegal firearms that should never have been on our streets. By convening law enforcement officials from across the region, we can share intelligence and strategies that stem the flow of illegal guns and keep New Yorkers safe."</p> <p>On Saturday, President Joe Biden expressed his support for Rivera, Mora and their families. "Officers put on the badge and head into harm's way every day," Biden tweeted. "We're grateful to them and their families for their extraordinary sacrifice."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/24 Baltimore violence interrupter killed
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/violence-interrupter-killed-baltimore-community-reels-gun-violence/story?id=82430617
GIST	<p>A man who worked on the front lines of preventing gun violence in Baltimore, Maryland, was shot and killed on Wednesday night in a quadruple shooting on E. Monument Street, in the McElderry Park neighborhood.</p> <p>Baltimore native DaShawn McGrier, 29, worked as a violence interrupter for Safe Streets and is the third member of the organization to be shot and killed in the last year.</p> <p>"[DaShawn] was passionate about his community, and was working hard to make that community safer for his family, friends and neighbors," said Meg Ward, Vice President of Strategic Growth and Community Partnerships at Living Classrooms -- a nonprofit that operates two of the 10 Safe Streets sites in the city, including McElderry Park. "He was a son, he was a father, he was a partner. He was a brother, he was a devoted and present father to his child."</p> <p>According to Ward, McGrier was having a conversation with the other two victims while working at his post on Monument Street when the shooting occurred.</p> <p>"Apparently, a tow truck came around the corner and they just shot up the block," Ward said.</p>

BPD identified the other victims as 28-year-old Tyrone Allen and 24-year-old Hassan Smith. A spokesperson told ABC News Friday that "no arrests have been made at this time."

"We are dedicating every available resource to finding and apprehending the cowardly perpetrators of this act," Baltimore Police Commissioner Michael Harrison said in a statement Wednesday.

When asked if this was a targeted shooting, police said the investigation is ongoing.

There have been more than 300 homicides in Baltimore each year for the past five years, with 338 in 2021 and 335 in 2020, BPD data shows.

Community members and Safe Streets workers gathered on E. Monument Street Saturday afternoon to honor McGrier and other victims of gun violence.

"What choices are we going to make? This is our community," said Safe Streets violence interrupter Alex Long in a passionate speech at the event. "These shootings gotta stop."

Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott also attended the event and said that the city is "determined to honor DaShawn's legacy in the best way we can -- by expanding community violence interventions across the city."

"[Safe Streets Baltimore] is not just an organization, but a calling. DaShawn believed that we could build a better Baltimore. Let's show him that we can," Scott tweeted, along with photos of the event.

Ward said Safe Streets organizes shooting response events to "denormalize" gun violence -- especially in neighborhoods where shootings are common -- by creating an opportunity for the community to come together to honor the victims and send the message that, "This is not OK." And on Saturday, they honored one of their own.

Violence interrupters also connect individuals with resources such as job placement opportunities and financial support.

Ward said that McGrier had been working as a violence interrupter for a little over a month, but had been a part of the Safe Streets community for a long time. He was a "hard worker," she said, who was a welding student at the North American Trade School during the day and worked at the Safe Streets McElderry Park site at night to help mediate conflicts that could lead to shootings.

"The work that is being done to stop this from happening is really, really important. And it makes it that much more important when you lose one of your own," she said.

McGrier's killing came as the Safe Streets community continues to mourn the deaths of two beloved longtime members who were killed over the past year and who had dedicated their lives to reducing gun violence.

Dante Barksdale, a Safe Streets outreach coordinator, and Kenyell "Benny" Wilson, a Safe Streets violence interrupter, were shot and killed in separate incidents in January and July. Two days before McGrier was killed, the community gathered to honor Barksdale on the anniversary of his death.

"We were devastated, it was very traumatizing. It's very difficult to say their names or to think of them, and to not feel that consistent void in our hearts, because they were definitely individuals who impacted the community in such an incredible way," Rashad Singletary, the associate director of gun violence prevention at MONSE told ABC News last year. "And for them to lose their lives to the same thing that we tried to save thousands of lives from, it was very, very disheartening and tragic."

How violence interrupter programs work

Safe Streets was launched in Baltimore in 2007 in the McElderry Park neighborhood. It is one of several violence prevention programs in the country that is based on a model that started in Chicago in the mid 1990s.

According to experts who study and evaluate solutions to gun violence, research shows that the concept is "promising," but challenges persist when it comes to implementation and funding.

Safe Streets, for example, serves 10 target areas but only covers 2.6 square miles in a city that spans 92 miles of Maryland.

But researchers told ABC News that one of the things that makes it all worthwhile is seeing the violence interrupters asserting their influence to keep the peace.

"[Violence interrupters] are from the same streets, grew up in the same areas and had the same experiences as young people, and so they just have more access and access means influence," said Jeffrey Butts, director of the Research and Evaluation Center at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. "The possibility of influencing someone's behavior and attitude is stronger if you come at them as an equal."

Violence interrupters also connect high risk individuals with resources that the organization offers, including job placement and financial support that could help alleviate some of the suffering -- conditions that lead some to resort to violence.

What the data shows

Recent studies have shown that Safe Streets programs have been effective at reducing gun violence in various neighborhoods.

A 2012 study published by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that Safe Streets workers were successful at reducing gun violence in three of four neighborhoods where the initial sites were established, Director of the Center for Gun Policy and Research at Johns Hopkins University Daniel Webster previously told ABC News.

Safe Streets workers mediated more than 2,300 conflicts in 2020, according to MONSE, and after gaining more funding from the city, the organization opened its tenth site in 2021.

"Safe Streets workers mediate the very types of conflicts we saw tonight," Harrison said in a statement Wednesday. "All the Safe Streets workers are to be applauded for their work in reducing gun violence and promoting a message of redemption and peace to the many young people of our city."

MONSE Director Shantay Jackson said that the mayor's office will be providing support to the family of the victims and the staff, including grief counseling.

"This is a reminder of the courageous, yet dangerous job our frontline staff does each day when working with those at the highest risk of being a shooter or the victim of a shooting," she said in a statement.

Ward said that the "tremendous loss" highlights the need for violence-prevention work in Baltimore.

"People are heartbroken," she said, "and at the same time, [the] feeling or sense is this is the reason to double down."

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HEADLINE	01/24 Indonesia: nightclub clash, fire kills 19
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/police-fire-clash-nightclub-kill-19-people-indonesia-82454296
GIST	JAKARTA, Indonesia -- A nightclub in Indonesia's West Papua province burned after two community groups clashed inside the building and 19 people were killed, officials said Tuesday.

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